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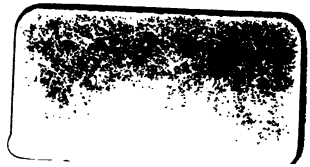

AN ENGLISH SQUIRE.

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AN ENGLISH SQUIRE.

A Novel.

BY

C. R. COLERIDGE,

AUTHOR OF "LADY BETTY," "HANBURY MILLS," "HUGH CRICHTON'S ROMANCE," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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PREFACE.

In bringing this tale in a complete form before the public, I should wish it to be understood that it arose out of a series of conversations with a friend who suggested the character of Alvar Lester, to the original invention of which I can lay no claim whatever. He came to me from his Spanish home, and I have done nothing with him but turn him into an English Squire.

C. R. COLERIDGE.

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PART I.

HOME LIFE.

"A little more than kin, and less than kind."

AN ENGLISH SQUIRE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LESTERS OF OAKBY.

"Young barbarians all at play."

SOME few years ago Mr. Gerald Lester was the head of a family of good blood and position, and the owner of Oakby Hall, the great house of a village of the same name in the county of Westmoreland. The border line between Westmoreland and Yorkshire crossed his property; but his house and park were in the former county, for which he was a deputy sheriff and justice of the peace.

He was not a man of very large fortune, and Oakby Hall was not a show place, but a well-built mansion of the last cen-

tury, with some architectural pretensions, and standing in the midst of that sort of wild and romantic scenery which, perhaps more than any other, fixes the affections of its inhabitants. Oakby, at any rate, was very dear to its owner.

The great sweeps of heather-clad moor, the fell sides, with their short green turf, the fertile valleys, had a character of their own, inferior as they were to the better-known parts of Westmoreland.

Oakby village was situated in one of the largest of these valleys, and the Hall lay low on the side of a hill over which the well-planted park stretched on either side. The house could be seen all the way up the long carriage drive, for it was only shut off from the park by an iron railing, within which the turf was mown close and fine, instead of being left to be cropped by sheep and cattle. The gardens were at the side, and there were no trees in front of the house but one oak of great size and beauty. There was a wide carriage sweep, and the space between this and the house

was paved, and on either side of the front door was a stone wolf of somewhat forbidding aspect—the crest of the Lesters.

The grey stone house thus exposed to view was stately enough, and though too open and free to be exactly gloomy, this northern front was bleak and cold, especially on a frosty winter twilight, when the light was dying away in the distance, and the piece of ornamental water and the pleasant bits of woodland beyond were not distinctly visible. No such thought ever crossed the minds of the young Lesters, who came back to it from school and college as to the dearest of homes; but to a stranger, a little doubtful of a welcome, it might perhaps look formidable.

Within doors a blazing fire and abundance of rugs and skins made the hall the most attractive place in the house, both for dogs and men; especially between the lights, when there was little to do anywhere else, and all were tired with their day's work, or ready to discuss their day's amusement.

Just before Christmas play was legitimate; and the young Lesters, skates in hand, had just returned from the lake, and were grouped together round the fire, noisily praising and criticizing each other's recent performances.

"I never should have had a tumble all day if Bob hadn't come up against me like a steam engine," cried the one girl, a tall creature of sixteen, big, fair, and rosy.

"I came against you! That's a good one. Who could keep out of your way?" ejaculated the aggrieved twin brother. "You can no more guide yourself than—"

"A balloon," put in the more softly accented voice of the eldest brother present, as he unfastened his skates from the neck of his great St. Bernard, who had dutifully carried them home for him.

"Now, Cherry, that's not true!" cried the girl in loud indignation. "Of course I can't be expected to do figures of eight and spread-eagles like you and Jack."

"I saw an American fellow the other day who skated twice as well as either of us."

"No? Ah! I don't believe that!" from the girl.

"But then they've ice all the year round," from Bob.

"I daresay they can't do anything else," from Jack.

"Jack always is so liberal!" from Cheriton; and then, "Hush! here's the squire."

It was sometimes said that no one of the young Lesters would be so fine a man as his father; and certainly Mr. Lester was a splendid specimen of an English gentleman, though the big Jack rivalled him in inches, and promised equal size and strength, while Cheriton, who was of a slighter build, inherited his blue eyes and brilliant colouring. But they were his own children—every one fair, and tall, and healthy; and their characteristic differences did not destroy their strong resemblance to each other and to their handsome father, who now stood in the midst of them with a foreign letter in his hand, at which the children glanced curiously.

He was not much above fifty; his hair and beard, which had once deserved to be called golden, had rather faded than grizzled, his skin was still fresh and healthy, and his eyes bright in colour and full of expression; the level brows met over them. His children, as has been said, were curiously like him—Annette, or Nettie, as she was commonly called, perhaps the most so. Although she was big and unformed, she had the promise of great beauty in her straight sulky brows and large sky-blue eyes, resplendent colouring which defied sunburn, and abundant yellow hair. Her nose was straight and fine, like her father's, but her full red lips were a trifle sullen; the contour of her face was heavy, and though she looked well born and well bred, she lacked the refinement of intelligent expression. But if her great blue eyes looked stupid and rather cross, they were as honest as the day; and at sixteen there was still time for thoughts and feelings to come and print themselves on this beautiful piece of flesh and blood.

She was very untidily though handsomely dressed, and had the awkwardness of a girl too big for her age; but as she stood leaning back against the oak table, there was such vigour and life in her strong young limbs as to give them a kind of grace. She had a low voice of refined quality, but she spoke with a strong north-country accent, as did her father. In the brothers it was much modified by their southern schooling. The twin brother, Robert, retained, however, a good deal of it. He was a heavier, less handsome likeness of her, and might have been described as a fine lad or a great lout, according to the prepossessions of the speaker. The next brother, John, or, as he was usually called, Jack, had, at nineteen, hardly yet outgrown the same ungainliness of manner; but his height, and the strength trained by many an athletic struggle, could not fail to be striking; and though he had something of the same sullen straightness of brow, the eyes beneath were thoughtful and keen. There was no lack of mental power

in Jack's grave young face, and he was a formidable opponent to his schoolfellows in contests of brain as well as of muscle.

Cheriton, except that his brows arched a little, so that he could not attain to the perfection of the family frown, and that he was an inch or two shorter and much slighter, was so like Jack that when he was grave and silent his brighter colouring and the moustaches to which he had attained were, at first sight, the chief points of difference between them. But then Jack's face to-day would be his face to-morrow, while Cheriton's expression varied with almost every word he spoke, so that he was sometimes said to be the image of his father, sometimes to be the one Lester who was like nobody but himself; while now and then old friends wondered how this handsome young man came to have such a look of the mother, who had been no beauty, but only a high-minded and cultivated woman. He was his father's favourite, and somehow his brothers were not jealous of the preference. "Cherry," as

they called him, was the family oracle, though he risked his place now and then when his utterances were not in accordance with the prevailing sentiment.

Mr. Lester's expression was now dark enough to indicate annoyance of no common kind; but it did not take much to make him look cross, and if his sons and daughter had not known that there was an unusual speck on the family horizon, they would have surmised that the keepers were in disgrace, the newspaper late in arriving, or that they themselves had unwittingly transgressed.

As it was they were all silent, though Cheriton looked up with a question in his eyes, and the twins glanced at each other.

"I have had a letter from—your brother; he has started on his journey, and will be here in a day or two."

No one spoke for a moment, and then Cheriton said,—

"Well, father, I shall be very glad to see him. It's a good time for him to come,

and I hope we shall be able to make it pleasant for him."

"Pleasant for *him*," growled Bob.

"It won't be at all pleasant for *us*," said his sister. "Fancy a foreign fellow interfering in all our concerns. And Granny says he's sure to set us a bad example."

"Ay," said the father, "you lads needn't be in too great a hurry to get up an intimacy."

"There's not much fear of that," said Cheriton.

"Ah, my boy," said Mr. Lester, turning to him, "you take it very well; but it's hard on you; no one knows better than I do."

"As for me," said Cheriton, with a shade of the characteristic family gruffness in his much pleasanter voice, "you know it has always been my wish that he should come, and why should we set ourselves against it?"

"He ought to have come sooner," said Jack.

"That's no affair of yours, Jack," said his father sharply. "Don't be so ready

with your comments. He is coming now, and—and I'll hear no more grumbling. I'm hanged if I know what we are all to make of him, though," he muttered as he left the hall.

"He'd better not interfere with me," said Bob. "I shall take no notice of him."

"Poor fellow!" said Cheriton satirically.

"I won't kiss him, I declare," cried his sister.

"Now you boys, and Nettie, look here," said Cheriton seriously. "Alvar is our father's son and our brother. He is the eldest, and has his rights. That's the fact; and his having lived all his life in Spain doesn't alter it. And if his coming is strange to us, what will it be for him? Isn't it an awful shame to set our backs up before we see him? Is it his fault?"

Cheriton's influence in the family was considerable, and the younger ones had no answer to his arguments; but influence and arguments are weak compared to prejudice; and no one answered till Jack grumbled out,—

"Of course we must do our duty by him, and perhaps he'll improve."

"On acquaintance," suggested Cheriton, with half-suppressed fun. "Suppose he's a finer fellow than any of us, and a better sort altogether. What shall we do then?"

"Oh, but he's a foreigner, you know," said Nettie, as if this settled the question. "Come, Bob, let's go and see the puppies fed."

"What I say is," said Jack, as the twins went away and left their elders to a freer discussion, "that the thing has been left too late. Here is Alvar,—twenty-five, isn't he?"

"Yes; he is only two years older than I am."

"How can he turn into an Englishman? It's all very well for you to chaff about it, and lecture the young ones; but the squire won't stand him with patience for a day; there'll be one continual row. Everything will be turned topsy-turvy. He'll go back to Seville in a month."

Cheriton was silent. He was older than Jack by nearly four years, and perhaps should

not have attributed so much importance to the grumbling of his juniors; but his wider out-look only enabled him to see that their feelings were one-sided, it did not prevent him from sharing them; and the gift of a more sympathetic nature did but make him more conscious of how far these feelings were justifiable. Home life at Oakby had its difficulties, its roughnesses, and its daily trials; but what did this signify to the careless boys who had no dignity to lose, and by whom a harsh word from their father, or a rough one from each other, was forgotten and repeated twenty times a day? He himself had hardly grown into that independent existence which would make an unkindness from a brother an insult, an injustice from a father a thing to be resented beyond the day. It was still all among themselves, they knew each other, and suited each other, and stood up for each other against the world. They were still the children of their father's house, and that tie was much too close and real for surface quarrels and disputes to slacken it. But this stranger, who must be the

very first among them all, yet who did not know them, and whom they did not know, who had a right to this same identity of interest, and yet who would assuredly neither feel nor win it!

Jack accused his father of having acted unjustly to them all; the younger ones rebelled with a blind prejudice which they did not themselves understand. Cheriton was vividly conscious of the stranger's rights, yet shrank from all they claimed from him; to the father he recalled resentment, weakness of purpose, and a youthful impulse, from the consequences of which he could not escape. The grandmother upstairs, no inconsiderable power in the Oakby household, formulated the vague distaste of her descendants, and strongly expressed her belief that a foreign heir would grieve his father, corrupt his brothers, and ruin his inheritance.

And now who was this foreign heir, this unknown brother, and what was the explanation of his existence?

CHAPTER II.

THE SON AND HEIR.

"Love should ride the wind
With Spain's dark-glancing daughters.

SOME six or seven and twenty years before the date when his sons were thus discussing their elder brother's arrival, Gerald Lester, then a young man fresh from college, had been sent abroad by his father to separate him from a girl, somewhat his inferior in rank, for whom he had formed an attachment. He was not then his father's heir, as he had an elder brother living, and he was supposed to be going to make his way at the bar; but though well conducted and brilliantly handsome, his talents and tastes were not of an order to make success rapid or certain, and such a

marriage as he had contemplated would have been, though he had a small independence, peculiarly inexpedient. Though at times passionate and defiant, he was not a person of much strength of will; and he yielded to the pressure put on him, partly from sense of duty—for he was by no means wanting in principle—and partly because it was too much trouble to resist.

The affair, however, left him in an unsettled state of mind, and increased his dislike to his profession. While wandering about in the south of Spain, he became acquainted, through some letters of introduction with which he had been provided, with a family of position of the name of De la Rosa. While staying with them he met with an accident which disabled him from travelling, and afforded him time and opportunity to flirt and sentimentalize with the beautiful Maria de la Rosa, who fell passionately in love with the handsome Englishman. Gerald's feelings were more on the surface, but he was much carried away by the circumstances;

he felt that he would make a poor return for the hospitality that had been shown him if he only "loved and rode away."

He was enough irritated by the compulsion that his father had put upon him to feel glad to act independently; while the natural opposition of Don Guzman de la Rosa to his daughter's marriage with a foreigner, stirred Gerald to more ardour than Maria's dark eyes had already awakened. Her birth, at any rate, was all that could be desired, her religion ought not to be an objection in one so good and pious, and the nationality of his younger son's wife could be of no consequence to old Mr. Lester. Don Guzman was not a zealous Catholic, and he yielded at length to his daughter's entreaties; the young Englishman's small independence seeming, in the eyes of the frugal Spaniard, a sufficient fortune.

Gerald Lester and Maria de la Rosa were married at Gibraltar, the difficulties of a legal marriage between a Protestant and a Roman Catholic being almost in-

surmountable on Spanish territory. In Gibraltar they lived for some time; but the marriage was not a happy one. Maria was a mere ignorant child, with all her notions irreconcilably at war with her husband's; and Gerald, who had his ideals, was very unhappy.

After some months, the sudden illness of his elder brother summoned him home, and while he was absent his child was born unexpectedly, and his young wife died. He learnt almost at once that he was his father's heir, and that a son was born to him. It seemed no moment for making such a disclosure. His grief for his brother sheltered the shock and surprise of the death of the poor young wife, and he satisfied his conscience by writing to the English clergyman who had solemnized his marriage, and desiring that he should baptize the boy according to the rites of the English Church. As this stipulation had been made at the marriage, Don Guzman allowed the order to be carried into effect. But as

no desire was expressed by the father as to a name, it was christened Alvaro Guzman —the Spanish grandfather omitting the Gerald, which he felt had been an ill-omened name to his daughter.

Gerald himself, meanwhile, was almost ready to forget the little Alvar's existence. He was ashamed of his foolish marriage, and remorseful at its secrecy and disobedience; the new life opened to him by his brother's death was exceedingly congenial. Why could not those unhappy months be as if they had never been! The child was of course an unfamiliar idea to him, and except with an occasional pang he hardly realized its existence; when the thought was forced on him, he regarded it with aversion.

Three months had not, however, passed since his wife's death, when he became acquainted with a Miss Cheriton, a young lady of good family and some fortune. She was not very pretty; but she was full of intelligence and refinement, and she was very good. Perhaps the force of contrast

was half the attraction. When his father urged him to pay his addresses to Miss Cheriton, he felt how willingly he would have done so, but an awkward disclosure lay between them. With all his faults he could not be so dishonourable as to marry her, without telling her that his heir was already born.

But the friendship between them, so different from anything that he had ever known before, grew and strengthened, till at last one evening he told her all the story. He had married foolishly and secretly, as far as his relations were concerned; his wife was dead and had left a little son. That was the story. Must it be for ever a bar between them? Fanny Cheriton listened, though she was a merry, quick-tongued girl, in silence. Then she said that he must tell his father the whole truth, and must acknowledge the child; he ought to come home and be brought up as an Englishman.

"Who is to bring it up?" asked Gerald.

"I will," said Fanny simply, amid fierce blushes, as she saw what her answer implied.

Thus supported, Gerald would indeed have been a coward had he shrunk from the communication; but it was a great blow to his father, who, however, was a stronger man than his son; and having been satisfied that all was fair and legal, and that Alvaro Guzman Lester was really his lawful heir, and next to Gerald in the entail, said shortly,—

"Fetch him home, and make an Englishman of him if you can. What's done can't be undone."

But when Gerald arrived at Seville, where Don Guzman lived, and where little Alvar had been taken, he found that by a strange coincidence the child had at once become of importance to his relations on both sides. By the death of Don Guzman's son, Alvar had become his heir, and when Gerald expressed a desire to take him home, he was met by great reluctance, and by a declaration that the child was so

delicate that a removal to a northern climate would certainly kill him. Perhaps Gerald's consciousness that he would not regard the poor little fellow's death as a misfortune, made him afraid to insist in the face of this argument. At any rate he returned without the child. Don Guzman's indifferentism in religion allowed him to consent that Alvar should, when he grew old enough, be taught the English language and the Anglican faith, and even showed how this might be managed by means of an English clergyman residing at Seville for his health; so that he was left with a sort of understanding that his mother's family were to have the charge of him for the present.

Miss Cheriton was much disappointed.

"Every year will make it harder," she said, and she resolved to use all her influence on Alvar's behalf. But her father-in-law's death soon after her marriage deprived her of his powerful aid, and, though his will carefully assured the succession to his son's eldest son, she could

not contend with her husband's distaste and the Spanish relations' determination not to give up the child. She had no other troubles. Her husband shared her views as to the duties and responsibilities of his station, and they did much for the good of those around them.

In spite of some harshness, Gerald was a good landlord and a good magistrate, and the most loving of fathers to the fair rosy boy who was now born to them. He never cared quite so much for the younger ones, but "Cherry" was his delight and pride, so pretty, so clever, and so apt at riding his little pony, or learning to fire a gun, and so fond of his father! If Alvar could but have been forgotten!

But Mrs. Lester was wise and far-seeing, and she would not allow Cheriton to forget. She talked to him about Alvar; she made him say his prayers for "my eldest brother away in Spain;" and she even caused him once to write a little letter expressing his wish to see his big brother, and to show him his pony and his dogs. Perhaps Alvar's

education was less advanced, for there only arrived a message of love from him in one of the rare letters that Don Guzman indited to Mr. Lester.

Cherry was rather a thoughtful child; his mother had succeeded in impressing his imagination, and he thought and talked a good deal about Alvar. One attempt was made to bring the child to England; but, when he reached France, he fell ill, and his grandfather hurried him back again, assuring his father that it was impossible he could live in a northern climate. Mr. Lester was too ready to believe this.

Soon after Cheriton went to school, Mrs. Lester died suddenly, and her loss was greater than even Cheriton in his passion of childish grief could guess. Grief sharpened Mr. Lester's temper, and the loss of his wife's influence narrowed his mind and character. His mother, who lived with him, and took care of the four children, did not urge on him the need for Alvar's return. It ceased to be under discussion, and the intercourse grew less and less.

Cherry, in his school life, naturally forgot for the time to think much about him, and at home he had a thousand interests, some shared with his father, some of his own. For Cheriton and Jack inherited their mother's talent, and as they grew up, had their minds full of many things out of their father's ken. When Cherry was twenty-one, his birthday was celebrated with various festivities. He was very popular, and the tenants drank his health. Nature had given him a ready tongue, and the speech he made was much beyond the usual run of boyish eloquence. And as he concluded, thanking them for their kindness, he paused, and with a deep flush, added, "And I wish my eldest brother, who is now in Spain, was here too, that we might know him, and that you might drink his health as well as mine."

"Cheriton, why did you say that?" said his father afterwards.

"Father, I thought they would forget Alvar's existence, and—I was afraid of forgetting it myself."

As Cheriton spoke, it occurred to Mr. Lester with new distinctness that he was really doing his second son a wrong, by allowing him to take for the time a place which could not be his permanently. This boy, with his ready tongue, his bright wit, and the look in his face that his father loved, was not his heir; was it well for him to act as if he were so? With a sudden resolution he wrote his eldest son a letter, requesting him to pay him a visit, and make his brothers' acquaintance.

Alvar, perhaps hurt at the long neglect, refused to do so, giving as a reason his grandmother's serious illness, and his father gladly let the matter drop. Cheriton was disappointed, and asked to be allowed to spend his next long vacation in Spain, and to see his brother. Mr. Lester, mindful of his own experiences, refused decidedly; and two years more had passed without any serious renewal of the subject (though Alvar's grandmother died in a few months), when Mr. Lester, while hunting, had a dangerous accident, and though

he escaped comparatively unhurt, the thought would obtrude itself, "A little more, and my boys must have welcomed as the head of the family an absolutely unknown foreigner." Under the influence of this feeling he wrote again to Alvar in a different strain, and received a different answer. Alvar agreed to come, and pledged himself to remain in England for a year, so as to have ample opportunity of becoming acquainted with his relations, and with the sort of life to which he was born as an English gentleman.

CHAPTER III.

A MOTHER OF HEROES.

"And the old grandmother sat in the chimney corner and spun."

ALVAR LESTER was coming home; but his image was so complete a blank to his brothers, that they could form no idea as to how it would become them to receive him. Jack, after lingering a little longer by the hall fire, observed that he could get nearly two hours' reading before dinner, and went off to his usual occupations. Cheriton's studies were, to say the least, equally important, as he was to take his degree in the ensuing summer; but now he shook his head.

"I can't fiddle while Rome is burning. There's too much to think of, and I'm

tired with skating. I shall go and see what granny has to say about it."

But when he was left alone, he still stood leaning against the mantelpiece. The Lesters were not a family who took things easily, and perhaps there was not one of them who shrank from the thought of the strange brother as much as he who had so persistently urged his return. Not all his excellent arguments could cure his own distaste to the foreigner. He was shy too, and could not tell how to be affectionate to a stranger, and yet he valued the tie of relationship highly, and could not carelessly ignore it. And he knew that he was jealous of the very rights of eldership on which he had just been insisting. Which of those things that he most valued were his own, and which belonged to the eldest son and heir of Oakby? What duties and pleasures must he give up to the new-comer? He did not think that any of their friends would cease to wish to see him at their houses, even if they included Alvar in their invitations.

Certainly he had a much more powerful voice than his brothers in the management of the stable, and indeed of all the estate; but he held this privilege only by his father's will; and probably Alvar would ride very badly, if at all. No—that sentiment was worthy of Bob himself! Certainly he could not understand English farming, if he were only half as ignorant of foreign countries as the clever English undergraduate, who did not feel quite sure if he had ever heard of any animals in Spain but bulls and goats, and could have sworn to nothing but grapes as a vegetable product of the peninsula. Nor could any stranger enter into the wants and welfare of his father's tenants, nor be expected to understand the schemes for the amusement and improvement of the neighbourhood, with which Cheriton was in the habit of concerning himself.

How could Alvar be secretary of a cricket club, or captain of a volunteer corps? No more than he could know each volunteer and cricketer, or be known

by them, with the experience and interest of a life-time. "They wouldn't hear of him," thought Cherry. He was too young, and his father was too young, for his thoughts to move easily forward to the time when Alvar was to be the master; it was simply as elder brother that he regarded him. "He ought to carve, and sit at the bottom of the table when my father's away!" And having come to this magnificent result of so much meditation, he laughed and shook himself, the ludicrous side of his perplexities striking him like a gleam of sunlight as he came to the wise resolution of letting things settle themselves as they came, and ran upstairs to his grandmother.

The ground-floor of Oakby Hall consisted of the hall, before mentioned, on one side of which opened a billiard-room, and on the other a large, long library, containing a number of old books in old editions, in which Mr. Lester took a kind of pride, though he rarely disturbed them in their places. There were some pictures,

dark, dingy, but bearing honoured names, and much respected by the family as "old masters," though Cheriton had once got into a great scrape by declaring that he had lived all his life in doubt as to whether a certain one in a corner was a portrait or a landscape, until, one exceptionally sunny day, he discovered it to be a fruit and flower piece.

The room was panelled with dark oak and fitted up with heavy carved furniture, and curtains, which, whatever their original tint, were now "harmonious" with the fading of more than one generation. Three small, deeply-recessed windows looked out to the front, and at the end of the long room opposite the door was a large one facing westward, with thick mullions and a broad, low-cushioned window seat. This window gave its character to the room, for through its narrow casements miles and miles of moor and fell were visible; a wide, wild landscape, marked by no conspicuous peaks, and brightened by no expanse of water,

yet with infinite variety in its cold, dark northern colouring, and grandeur and freedom in its apparently limitless extent.

Here was the place to watch sunset and moonrise, or to see the storms coming up or drifting away, and to hear them, too, howling and whistling round the house or dashing against the window-panes. The west window was one of the strong influences that moulded life at Oakby. This library was the Lesters' ordinary living room; but behind it was a smaller and more sheltered one, called Mr. Lester's study, which he kept pretty much to himself.

The dining-room was at the other side of the house, behind the billiard-room, and had a view of a hill-side and fir-trees. It contained all the modern works of art in the house—a large picture of Mr. Lester and his second wife, their children, horses, and dogs, all assembled at the front-door; and a very stiff pink and white, blue-eyed likeness of Cheriton in hunting costume, which had been taken when he came of age.

There was a fine old staircase with wooden wolves of inferior size, but equal ferocity, to their stone brethren without, adorning the corners of the balustrade, and above the library was the drawing-room, whither Cheriton now betook himself. It was a stiff, uninteresting room, but with an unmistakable air of stateliness and position, and though, like all the house, it lacked the living charm of living taste and arrangement, it possessed what even that cannot always give, and what is quite impossible to a new home without it—a certain air of rightness and appropriateness, as if the furniture had grown into its place. Still, the room, handsome as it was, and full of things which were choicer and more valuable than their owners knew, was uncomfortable, the chairs were high and the sofas were hard, and the yellow damask, with which they were covered, slippery; no one had a place of his own in it; the wild western view gave it an unhomely dreariness, hardly redeemed by an extra window looking south over the

flower-garden, which in that bleak climate would have needed more fostering care than it ever obtained, to be very gay, even in summer. Now of course it was snowy and desolate.

Only in this winter weather would Mrs. Lester have been found in her arm-chair in the drawing-room; but an attack of rheumatism had recently reminded her of her seventy years, and obliged her to remain in the house, at any rate till the frost was over. She had lived with her son ever since his second wife's death, and had kept his house, and in a manner presided over the education of his children; but though she was the only woman of the family, and an old woman and a grandmother, it was not from her that the boys looked for spoiling tenderness, nor were the softer and sweeter elements of the family life, few as they were, fostered by her influence.

She had handed down to her children, and still exhibited herself, their height and vigorous strength, and perhaps some-

thing of their beauty, though she was a darker and more aquiline-featured person than her son, who resembled his father. Whether the grandchildren inherited her clear, but narrow vision, her upright, but prejudiced mind, and her will, that went its way subject to no side lights or shadows, perhaps it was early days to tell. She was an entirely unintellectual, unimaginative person; but within her experience, which was extremely limited—as she could hardly realize the existence, much less the merits of natures unlike her own—she had a good deal of shrewd sense, and it was much easier to feel her strictures unjust than to prove them so.

She had a thorough knowledge of, and had all her life been accustomed to share in, the out-door sports and occupations of country life, and very recently had been able to ride and drive with the skill of long practice. These had been the pleasures of her youth; but though she was rather an unfeminine woman, she had never been in any sense a fast one. She

was altogether devoid of coquettish instincts, and though she had been a handsome girl, who had passed her life almost entirely among sporting men, and whose tongue was in consequence somewhat free, she had hardly left through the country side the memory even of an old flirtation.

Within doors she had few occupations; but when her daughter-in-law's death rendered her presence at Oakby again necessary, she had taken the command of the children, and ruled them vigorously according to her lights. She wished to see them grow up after her ideal, and would have despised them utterly if they had gambled, drunk, or dissipated their property by extravagance. She would have thought very slightingly of them if their taste had been exclusively for an indoor or studious life, or if they had been awkward riders or bad shots, though she recognized the duty of "attention to their studies" in moderation, particularly on wet days.

She was tolerably satisfied with her

grandsons, who had imbibed this view of life with the smell of the heather and the pines, but she was a little suspicious of the Cheriton blood, and of the talents of which she had succeeded in making Cherry and Jack half ashamed. Perhaps her granddaughter was her favourite, and she rejoiced in the girl's love for an out-door life, and certainly did not discourage the outrageous idleness with which Nettie neglected the lessons she was supposed to learn of the governess at Oakby Rectory.

On the present occasion Cheriton found her in an unusually thoughtful mood. Her bright dark eyes were still so strong that she rarely used glasses; nor did she often give in to wearing a shawl; but her dress, which was scrupulously appropriate to her age and circumstances—handsome black silk, and soft white cap fastened under her chin—had an oddly inappropriate air on her tall, upright figure, and strong, marked features.

"Well, granny, so he's really coming,"

said Cheriton cheerfully, as he sat down opposite to her.

"Oh, your father's been here," said Mrs. Lester. "We'll have to do with him for a year, I suppose."

"Oh, we'll get on with him somehow. I mean to strike up a friendship," returned Cherry boldly.

"You'll be very soft if you do. Your father and I, remember, know what these Spaniards are like; they're a bad lot—a bad lot."

"Well, my father ought to know—certainly! But you see he has told us so little about them."

"I have told my son that I think he couldn't have chosen a worse time to have him home—just when you lads are all growing up, and ready to learn all the tricks he can teach you."

"What tricks?" said Cheriton, feeling much insulted by the suggestion.

"D'ye think I'm going to teach you beforehand?"

"I assure you, granny," said Cheriton

impressively, "that the tricks I see at Oxford are such that it would be impossible for Alvar to beat them."

"And what have you been up to now?" said his grandmother sharply.

"Why, granny, I really shouldn't like to tell you the half of them. But I'm quite accustomed to 'tricks,' a monkey couldn't be more used to them. There was that affair with the chapel door—"

"Oh, don't tell me your monkey tricks," said his grandmother, with half-humorous indignation. "I know what they lead to; they're bad enough. But your half-brother will smoke like a chimney and drink like a fish, and gamble before the lads on a Sunday. If those are your Oxford manners—"

"Really," said Cheriton seriously, "we have no reason to suppose that he will do anything of the kind; and if he did, the boys are very little in the mood to imitate him. I only hope they'll be decently civil to him."

Mrs. Lester was herself a much cooler and more imperturbable person than any of her

descendants; but she was often the cause of irritation in others, from a calm persistency that ignored all arguments and refutation; and she was especially apt to come across Cheriton, whom she did not regard with the admiration due from a loving grandmother to a dutiful, handsome grandson.

"It's a great misfortune, as I always told my son it would be. You, Cherry, are fond of strangers and outlandish ways, so maybe he'll suit you."

"Well, granny, I hope he may, and we'll get you to come and light our pipes for us," said Cherry, keeping his temper. But the coaxing sweetness that made him the one non-conductor of quarrels in a sufficiently stormy household, was apparently lost, for Mrs. Lester went on,—

"He'll suit the Seytons better than he'll suit us."

"There's nothing to say against the Seytons *now*," said Cheriton hotly; muttering under his breath, "I hate prejudice."

Mr. Lester's entrance interrupted the

discussion, though a long story of a broken fence between his property and Mr. Seyton's did not give it a smoother turn.

As Mr. Seyton's fences had been in a disgraceful condition for at least as long as Cheriton could remember, he was well aware that the present grievance was only an outlet for a deeper-seated one, but his grandmother struck in,—

"Ah, Cheriton may see what it is to take to bad ways and bad connexions. I've been telling him his half-brother is likely enough to make friends with the Seytons, and bring their doings over here."

"With a couple of boys younger than Jack," cried Cheriton. "Any one would think, granny, that we had a deadly feud with the Seytons."

"I'll not hear the matter discussed," loudly interposed Mr. Lester. "Hold your tongue, Cherry. Alvar will have to mind what he is about. I'm sick of the sound of his name. If he had a

good English one of his own it would be something."

"Why hasn't he, then?" was on the tip of Cherry's tongue, but he suppressed it; and as his grandmother walked away, saying that it was time to dress for dinner, he got up and stood near his father.

"I say, dad, never mind; we'll get along somehow," he said.

The expression of passionate irritation passed out of Mr. Lester's face, and was succeeded by a look of regretful affection as he put his hand on his favourite son's shoulder.

"I'd give half I'm worth, my boy, to undo it. It's a wrong to you, Cherry—a wrong. It gives me no pleasure to think of the place in his hands after I'm gone."

"Father," interposed Cheriton firmly, "the only wrong is in speaking of it so. It is no wrong to any of us. And you know," he added shyly and under his breath, "mamma would never let us think so."

Mr. Lester was a person who would not

endure a touch on his tenderest feelings. He had never mentioned the young wife, whose word had been his law, to the son whom he adored for her sake, and who influenced his violent yet impressionable nature by the inheritance of hers. That influence led him to listen to the words which he could not controvert; but he did not love his unknown son the better for the pain which this defence of him had cost him. Cheriton felt that he had ventured almost too far, and he turned off the subject after a pause, by saying quaintly,—

"I wonder what the fox thinks of it all."

"What d'ye mean?"

"Don't you remember that old lady who came to see granny once, and when Jack and I raved about a day's hunting, would say nothing but 'I wonder what the fox thinks of it all?' That was making the other side much too important, wasn't it?"

"Ah, you're ready with your jokes," said his father, not wishing to follow out

the little fable, but with a daily sense of liking for the voice and smile with which it was uttered. "Come, I'll have a pipe with you before dinner."

CHAPTER IV.

STRANGERS YET!

"My mother came from Spain . . .
And I am Spanish in myself
And in my likings."

It was late on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. The hall at Oakby was full of branches of holly and ivy. Nettie, perched on the top of an oak cabinet, was sticking sprays into the frame of her grandfather's picture, and Jack and Bob were arranging, according to time-honoured custom, a great bunch of bright-berried holly over the mantelpiece, to do which in safety was a work unattainable by feminine petticoats.

"It's a great shame of Cherry not to come in time to help," said Nettie.

"They'll have got hold of him down at

the church," said Jack. "There, that's first-rate."

"I say, Jack, do you know Virginia Seyton came home yesterday? Isn't it funny that they should have one too?"

"One what?"

"Why, a relation, a sister, when we've got a brother. I wonder—"

Suddenly Nettie stopped, as a crash of wheels sounded on the frosty gravel, and the front door bell pealed loudly.

"Oh, Jack!" and Nettie jumped off the cabinet at one bound, six feet high though it was, and caught hold of the end of Jack's coat in a perfect agony of shyness. "Oh, let's run away!"

"Let go. I can't get down. Stand still and don't be silly," said Jack, gruffly, as he got off the steps, while the butler hurried forward and threw open the door. Nettie stood in the fire-light, her golden hair flying in the gust of wind, her hands together, like a wild thing at bay. Bob remained perched, half way up the ladder, and Jack made a step or two forward.

A tall figure in a dark cloak, with bright crimson lining, and a large felt hat, stood in the doorway.

"Are you Cheriton?" he said eagerly, and with a strong foreign accent.

"No; he's out. I'm Jack. How d'ye do? We didn't know when you were coming," said Jack, in a tone from which embarrassment took every shade of cordiality. He put out his hand quickly, however, as the stranger made a movement as if possibly intending a more tender salutation. Alvar took it, then removed his hat, and advancing towards the speechless Nettie said,—

"This is my sister? May I not salute her?" and lightly touched her cheek with his lips. "I have thought of you, my sister," he said.

"Have you?" stammered Nettie, hanging down her head like a child. Bob remained motionless on his ladder, and Jack said,—

"Here's my father," as Mr. Lester came hurriedly into the hall, nearly as much

embarrassed as his children, and pale with an agitation which they did not share. Alvar turned round, and bowed low with a respectful grace that his brothers certainly could not have imitated.

Mr. Lester came forward and held out his hand. It needed all his innate sense of good breeding to overcome the repulsion which the very idea of his strange son caused him. The sense of owing him amends for long-neglected duty, the knowledge how utterly out of place this foreigner must be as heir of Oakby, the feeling that by so recognizing him he was wronging alike his forefathers and his other children, while he yet knew how much his whole life through he had wronged Alvar himself, came upon him with renewed force. Then as he heard such tones, and saw such a face as he had not seen for years, what rush of long past sentiment, what dead and buried love and hate came rushing over him with such agitating force, that in the effort to avoid a scene, and a display of feeling which, yielded to, might have

smoothed the relations between them for ever, his greeting to his son was as cold as ice!

"How do you do, Alvar? I am glad to see you. We did not expect you so soon. You must have found your journey very cold."

"I did not delay. It was my wish to see my father," said Alvar, a little wistfully. "My father, I trust, will find me a dutiful son."

Here Bob giggled, and Jack nearly knocked him off the ladder with the nudge evoked by his greater sense of propriety.

"No doubt—no doubt," said Mr. Lester. "I hope we shall understand each other, soon. Where's Cheriton? Jack, suppose you show—him—your brother, his room. Dinner at seven, you know. I daresay you're hungry."

"I did take a cup of coffee, but it was not good," said Alvar, as he followed Jack upstairs; and the latter, mortally afraid of a *tête-à-tête*, shut him into the bedroom

prepared for him, and rushed downstairs to encounter Cheriton, who came hurrying in, thinking himself late for dinner.

"Cherry, he's come!"

"Oh, Cherry, he's so queer! He makes pretty speeches, and he bows!"

"He's a regular nigger, he's so black!"

"Oh, Cherry, it's *awful!*"

"What have you done with him? Where's the squire?" said Cherry, as soon as he could make himself heard.

"Oh, papa has seen him, and Jack's taken him into his room," said Nettie.

"He thought I was you," said Jack.

Cheriton stood still for a moment, as shy as the rest, then, with an effort, he ran upstairs.

"It's only kind to go and say how d'ye do to a fellow," he thought, as he tapped at the bedroom door, and entered with outstretched hand, and blushing to the tips of his ears. "Oh, how d'ye do? I'm so sorry I was out of the way; they kept me to nail up the wreaths. I'm very glad to see you. Aren't you very cold?"

Probably the foreigner understood about half of this lucid and connected greeting; but something in the warmth of the tone made him come forward eagerly.

"You are then really my brother Cheriton? I thought it was again the other one."

"What, Jack? Yes, we're thought alike, I believe."

"I do not see that," said Alvar, contemplating him gravely; "but I have known you in my thoughts—always."

"I'm sure—we've all thought a great deal about you. But there's no one to help you. Have you got your things? I'll ring," nearly pulling down the bell-rope. "And, look here, I'll just dress and come back, and go down with you—shall I?"

Cheriton's summons was rapidly answered, as curiosity inspired the servants as well as their masters; and leaving Alvar to make his toilet, he hastened upstairs. The three brothers slept in a long passage at the top of the house, over the drawing-room. As Cherry's step sounded, both

his brothers' doors burst open simultaneously, and Jack and Bob, in various stages of dressing, at once ejaculated,—

"Well!"

"How can I tell? It's awfully late. I shall never be ready," and Cherry banged his own door, too much astounded by the new brother to stand a discussion on him.

As soon as he was ready he went down stairs, and found Alvar, rather to his relief, attired in correct evening costume.

"I suppose you haven't seen my grandmother yet?" he said.

"Your grandmother? I did not know there was a grandmother," said Alvar, in a much puzzled voice, which, together with the sense of how much his brother had to learn, nearly upset Cherry's gravity.

"My father's mother, you know. She lives with us," he said. "She is your grandmother too."

"Ah!" said Alvar, "I loved my grandmother much. This other one, she will be most venerable, I am sure."

"Come along then," said Cherry, unable to stand more conversation at present..

Mrs. Lester, whatever her private opinions might be, had too much respect for the heir, for herself, and for the house of Lester, not to attire herself with unusual dignity, and to rise and advance to receive her grandson.

"How do you do, Alvar?" she said. "You have been a long time in coming to see us."

Alvar, after a moment's pause, as if doubtful what sort of salutation would be acceptable, bowed low and kissed her hand. Nettie laughed; but her grandmother drew herself up as if the act of homage was not altogether displeasing to her, and then looked keenly at the new grandson, who, as far as looks went, was no unworthy scion of the handsome Lesters.

He was as tall as his father, though of a different and slighter make, and stood with a sort of graceful stiffness, unlike the easy loose-limbed air of most young Eng-

lish gentlemen. He had a dark olive skin, and oval face; but his features were not unlike the prevailing family type; and though his hair was raven black, it grew and curled in the picturesque fashion of his father's, which Cheriton alone of the other sons inherited. But he had the splendid black liquid eyes, with blue whites, and slender arched eyebrows of his Spanish mother, and possessed a picturesque foreign beauty that seemed to group the fair-haired brothers into a common-place herd. He had a grave, impassive face, and held his head up with an air suggestive of Spanish grandees.

It was very difficult to make conversation when they went in to dinner, the more so as Alvar evidently did not easily follow rapid English, and either he was bewildered by new impressions, or not very open to them, for he had not much to say about his journey. Cheriton, as he tried to talk as if there was no perplexing stranger present, could not help wondering whether all that was so strange to himself

came with any familiarity to his father. Had he known what his son would be like? Could he touch any chord to which Alvar could find a response? Had eyes like those great rolling black ones ever looked love into his own? And if so, was it all forgotten, or was the remembrance distasteful?

"He was older than I am now," thought Cherry. "Surely the thoughts of to-day could never fade away entirely."

Mr. Lester uttered no word that betrayed any knowledge of his son's country. He spoke less than usual, and after due inquiries for Alvar's relations, entirely on local matters; Alvar volunteered few remarks, but as the dessert appeared, he turned to Cherry, who sat beside him, and said,—

"Is it not now the custom to smoke?"

"Not at dinner," said Cherry hurriedly, as his father replied,—

"Certainly not," and all the bright blue eyes round the table stared at Alvar, who for the first time coloured, and said,—

"Pardon, I have transgressed."

"We'll go and have a pipe presently," said Cherry; and oh! how ardently he longed for that terrible evening to be over.

"It was a *horrid* Christmas Eve," muttered Nettie to Bob; and perhaps her father thought so too, for he rang the bell early for prayers.

"What is this?" said Alvar, looking puzzled, as a prayer-book was placed before him.

"We're going to have prayers," said Nettie, rather pertly. "Don't you?"

"Ah, it is a custom," said Alvar, and he took the book, and stood and knelt as they did, evidently watching for his cue.

When this ceremony was over, Bob and Nettie rushed off, evidently to escape saying good-night, and Cheriton invited the stranger to come and smoke with him, conducting him to a little smoking-room downstairs, which was only used for visitors, as the boys generally smoked in a room at the top of the house, into which Cherry knew Bob and Jack would

greatly resent any intrusion. Mr. Lester walked off with a general good-night. Alvar watched Cherry kiss his grandmother, but contented himself with a bow. Jack discreetly retired, and when Cheriton had ascertained that Alvar never smoked a pipe, but only a cigar or a cigarette, and had made him sit down by the fire, Alvar said,—

"My father is then a member of the clerical party?"

"I don't think I quite understand you," said Cherry.

"Your prayers—he is religious?"

"Oh, most people have prayers—I don't think we're more particular than others. My father and Mr. Ellesmere, our rector, are friends, naturally," said Cherry, feeling it very difficult to explain himself.

"My grandfather," said Alvar, "is indifferent."

"But—you're a Protestant, aren't you?"

"Oh, yes. I have been so instructed. But I do not interest myself in the subject."

Cheriton had heard many odd things at Oxford said about religion, but never anything to equal the *naïveté* of this avowal. He was quite unprepared with a reply, and Alvar went on,—

"I shall of course conform. I am not an infidel; but I leave those things to your—clergy, do you not call them?"

"Well, some people would say you were right," said Cherry, thankful that Jack was not present to assert the inalienable right of private judgment.

"And politics?" said Alvar; "I know about your Tories and your Whigs. On which side do you range yourself?"

"Well, my father's a Tory and High Churchman, which I suppose is what you mean by belonging to the clerical party; and I—if all places were like this—I'd like things very well as they are. Jack, however, would tell you we were going fast to destruction."

"There are then dissensions among you?"

"Oh, he'll come round to something, I

dare say. But our English politics must seem mere child's play to you."

"I have taken no part," said Alvar. "My grandfather would conform to anything for peace, and I, you know, my brother, am in Spain an Englishman—though a Spaniard here."

"I hope you'll be an Englishman soon."

"It is the same with marriage," said Alvar; "I have never betrothed myself, nor has my grandfather sought to marry me. He said I must see English ladies also. One does not always follow the heart in these matters," he concluded rather sentimentally.

"No one would ever dream of your following anything else," said Cherry, beginning gruffly, but half choked with amusement as he spoke.

"No? And you, you have not decided? Ah, you blush, my brother; I am indiscreet."

"I didn't blush—at least that's nothing. Turkey-cock was my nickname at school always," said Cherry hastily.

"I do not understand," said Alvar; and after Cherry had explained the nature and character of turkey-cocks, he said, "But I think that was not civil."

"Civil! It wasn't meant to be. English boys don't stand much upon civility. But," he added, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, "if we are rough, I hope you won't mind; the boys don't mean any harm by it. You'll soon get used to our ways, and—and we'll do our best to make you feel at home with us."

A sudden sense of pity for the lonely brother, a stranger in his father's house, softened Cheriton's face and voice as he spoke, though he felt himself to be promising a good deal.

Alvar looked at him with the curious, impassive, unembarrassed air that distinguished him. "You are not 'rough!'" he said! "you are my brother. I am told that here you do not embrace each other. I am an Englishman, I give you my hand."

Cheriton took the slender, oval-shaped

hand, which yet closed on his more angular one, with a firm, vigorous grasp.

"All right," he said; "you'd better ask me if you don't know what to do. And now I think you must be tired. I'll show you your room. I hope you won't mind the cold much; I am sorry it's so frosty."

"Oh, the cold is absolutely detestable, but I am not tired," said Alvar briskly.

It was more than Cheriton could say, as he shut this perplexing brother into the best bedroom, which he could not associate with anything but a state visit. He felt oppressed with a sense of past and future responsibility, of distaste which he knew was mild compared to what every other member of his family would experience, of contempt, and kindliness and pity, and, running through all, the exceeding ludicrousness, from an Oakby point of view, of some of Alvar's remarks.

This latter ingredient in his perplexity was strengthened, when he got upstairs, by Jack, who, detecting his dispirited look,

proceeded to encourage him by remarking solemnly,—

"Well, I consider it a great family misfortune. Dispositions and habits that are entirely incongruous can't be expected to agree."

"Do shut up, Jack; you're not writing an essay. Now I see where Alvar's turn for speechifying comes from; you get it somehow from the same stock! All I know is, it's too bad to be down on a fellow when he's cast on our hands like this. Now I am going to bed, I'm tired to death; and if we're late on Christmas morning, we shall never hear the last of it."

While the young brothers thus discussed this strange disturber of their accustomed life, their father's thoughts were still more perplexing. He had so long put aside the unwelcome thought of his eldest son that he felt inclined to regard his presence with incredulity. Surely this dark, stately stranger could have no concern with his beloved homestead with its surrounding

moors and fells. This boy had never ridden by his side, nor taken his first shots from his gun, nor differed from him about the management of his estate.

Oakby, with all its duties and pleasures, had no connexion with him; and with Oakby Mr. Lester had for many years felt himself to be wholly identified. But those dark eyes, those slow, soft accents, that air so strange to his sons, awoke memories of another self. He saw Cheriton's puzzled attempt at understanding the strange brother. But this strange son was *not* strange to him. He knew the very turns of expression that Alvar's imperfect English suggested. For the first time for years the Spanish idioms and Spanish words came back to his memory. He could have so talked as to set his son in accordance with his surroundings, he understood, to his own surprise, exactly where this very new shoe would pinch.

But these memories, though fresh and living, were utterly distasteful, and nothing that cost him pain awoke in Mr. Lester's

mind any answering tenderness. He was a man with a weak will, a careful conscience, and imperfectly controlled temper and affections.

He much preferred to do right than to do wrong, and he generally did do right; in this one crucial instance he had neglected and slurred over the right thing for years, and now he was not sufficiently accustomed to question himself to realize how far he could have made amends for past neglect, how far he could now make his son fit for the heirship of which he neither could nor would deprive him. No, Alvar was a painful sight to him, therefore he would continue to ignore him as far as possible. He stood in the beloved Cheriton's light, and therefore all the small difficulties that his incongruous presence caused would be left to Cheriton to set to rights, or not be set to rights at all.

It was pleasant, and it was not very difficult to Mr. Lester, as he woke in the light of the Christmas dawn, to turn his mind from Alvar's presence to the many

duties that the season demanded of him. The children all woke up curious and half-unfriendly. Cheriton wondered what Alvar was thinking of. But they none of them knew to what thoughts or feelings the pealing, crashing Christmas bells awoke the unknown heir.

"Nay, you'll know no more what he's after than if he was yonder picture," said the grandmother in answer to some remarks, and as Cheriton heard him coming down stairs he felt that this was exactly the state of the case.

CHAPTER V.

THE SEYTONS OF ELDERTHWAITE.

"All things here are out of joint."

In the midst of a waste of unswept snow across the hill behind Oakby Hall, there was a large old house, originally of something the same square and substantial type, but of more ambitious architecture, for there were turrets at the four corners, overgrown and almost borne down by enormous bushes of ancestral ivy; while the great gates leading to the stables were of fanciful and beautiful ironwork, now broken and falling into decay. Great tree-trunks lay here and there on undulating slopes, the shrubberies flung wild branches over the low stone wall dividing them from the park, where a gate swung weakly

on its hinges. There were few tall trees, but here and there along the drive a solitary beech of great size and beauty suggested the course of an avenue once without its equal in the country round. An old man was feebly sweeping away the snow in front of the house, and a gentleman stood smoking a cigar on the steps—a slenderly-made man, with a delicate, melancholy face, and a pointed grey beard, dressed in a shabby shooting-coat. His eyes turned from the slow old sweeper, past the relics of the avenue, to a ruinous-looking lodge, the chimneys of which sent no smoke into the frosty air.

Mr. Seyton of Elderthwaite was used to these signs of adversity, but to-day he was struck by them anew, for he was wondering how they would look in the eyes of a stranger. Oakby, with its strict laws, its rough humours, its ready-made life, would be a strange experience to its foreign heir. What would Elderthwaite, with ruined fortunes and blighted reputation be to a petted and prosperous girl, brought

up by gentle, religious women, in all the proprieties and sociabilities of well-to-do country villa life? What would his daughter say to the home she had left as a child, and had never seen since?

The Seytons were a family of older standing in the county than the Lesters, and had once been of superior fortune. At present their condition was, and rightly, very different. The Lesters, with many shortcomings, had been men who, on the whole, had endeavoured to do their duty in their station, and had governed their tenants, brought up their children, attended to public business, and managed their own affairs in an honest and right-minded, if not always in a very enlightened fashion.

But the Seytons had had a bad name for generations. It is true that no tales of wild and picturesque wickedness were told of the present head of the house, such as had made his father's name a bye-word for harshness and violence, and for all manner of evil living; but the family traditions were strong against him; he

inherited debt and a dishonoured name, and, alas! with them the tendencies and temptations that had brought them about. He had looked with bitter, injured eyes at the timber that was sold for his father's gaming debts; but many a noble tree fell to pay his own, before he married a girl, innocent, high-minded, and passionate-tempered.

It was a very unhappy marriage, and Mr. Seyton never forgave his wife for her broken heart, nor himself for breaking it. When she died, her relations took away her daughter, pledging themselves to provide for her, if she were left undisturbed in their hands. The father had enough to do with his sons. The eldest, Roland, was a fine, handsome fellow, and began life with the sad disadvantage of being expected to go wrong. He got a commission, but during the short intervals that he spent at home, was personally unpopular.

In one of these he took a great fancy to Cheriton Lester during an interval between the latter's school and college life, and

Cheriton being warned against him as a bad companion, stuck to him with equal perverseness and generosity. Roland was much the elder of the two, but Cherry's vigorous youth took the lead in the friendship, and gave it his own impress. It was ended by such a scandal in Elderthwaite village as those which had made the name of Roland Seyton's grandfather hated by all the country round, as one by whom no man's hearth was respected, and with whom no man's daughter was safe.

The discovery shocked Cheriton unspeakably; all the parties concerned were well known to him, and he felt that of such sins he could never think or speak lightly. But he would not join in loud or careless blame of his friend, who perhaps felt his truest pang of repentance at the boy's confused miserable face in the one parting interview allowed by Mr. Lester before Roland joined his regiment, about to sail for India.

"You need not have been afraid, sir," Roland said, when accused of having set

him a bad example; "I knew how to choose my confidant."

After Roland's departure, other tales to his discredit, and debts which it was impossible to pay, came to his father's ears, and these additional troubles helped to strengthen habits of self-indulgence already formed, which had made Mr. Seyton a man old before his time, melancholy-faced and gentle-mannered, whom nobody respected and nobody disliked. But the two younger boys had a bad start in life, and seemed little likely to redeem the family fortunes.

It was not often that Mr. Seyton thought of anything but the immediate dulness and discomfort of the hour, or of its small alleviations; but to-day these recollections pressed on him. He thought, too, of his shabby furniture, and his ill-conducted household; how unfit a home for his well-dowered daughter; how unlike both her aunt's house and the pleasant foreign tour which, since her aunt's death, she had been enjoying.

"Papa, papa!" cried a bright voice behind him, "Good morning," then as he turned round, the newly-arrived daughter exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck, "Oh, how nice it is to say 'Good morning, papa!'"

She was a fair creature enough, a true Seyton, with slender frame and pointed chin, creamy complexion and rich brown hair, but the large, round eyes, tender, intense, and full of life, were her mother's, though clear and untroubled as the mother's had never been.

"So you are glad to come home, Virginia?" said her father, rather sadly.

"Yes, papa, I am just delighted. I always made stories about home when I was at Littleton. I was very happy, you know, with dear Aunt Mary and all my friends; but it was so *uninteresting* not to know more of my very nearest relations."

"You will find it very different, my dear, from what you are accustomed to. This is a dull place."

"Oh, papa, I think it is so silly to be

dull! I shall be quite ready to like anything you wish," said Virginia warmly.

"My dear, you shall take your own way. It would be hard at least if I could not give you that," said Mr. Seyton, looking at her as if he did not quite know what to do with this gaily-dressed, frank-spoken daughter. "Now let us come to breakfast."

"I am afraid I am late," said Virginia; "but it is never easy to be in time after a journey."

"You are punctual for this house, my dear; we take such things easy. But your aunt is down, you see, in your honour." As Mr. Seyton spoke they came into the dining-room, a long, low room, with treasures of curious carving round its oak panels, hardly visible in its imperfect light.

A lady sat pouring out the tea. She had the delicate features and peculiar complexion of her family, but her eyes, instead of being like Mr. Seyton's, vague and sad, were sharp and sarcastic; she had more

play of feature, and, though she looked fully her age, had the air of having been a beauty.

Miss Seyton had once been engaged to be married, but her engagement had been broken off in one of the storms of discreditable trouble that had overwhelmed her father and brothers, no one knew exactly how or why. She had never married, and had lived ever since with her brother, not always without scandal and remark. Still her presence had kept Elderthwaite on the visiting-list of the county, and made it possible for her niece to live there.

In spite of her sharp, eager eyes, she had an indescribable laziness and nonchalance of manner, and poured out the tea as if it was an effort beyond her. The boys' places remained vacant. There was a little talk at breakfast-time, but it did not flow easily. Virginia would have had plenty to say, but she had a sense that what she did say caused her aunt inward surprise or amusement, and she began to feel shy.

When the meal was over, Mr. Seyton

sauntered away slowly, and Virginia said, "Do we sit in the drawing-room in the morning, Aunt Julia?"

"Yes, as often as not," said Miss Seyton. "You are welcome to arrange all such matters for yourself. Girls have ways of their own."

"I don't want to have any strange or uncomfortable ways, auntie," said Virginia; "I want to feel quite at home, and to be useful."

"Useful!" said Miss Seyton. "What's your notion of being useful?"

She did not speak unkindly, but with a curious sort of inward amusement, as if the notions of the bright-eyed girl were an odd study to her.

"I'm afraid I haven't very clear notions. I want to make it cheerful for papa—Aunt Mary always said he wasn't strong or well; and perhaps the boys want things done for them; my friends' brothers always did," said Virginia a little pathetically.

"There's one thing, my dear, I wish you to understand at once. I shall never in-

terfere with you; but I don't mean to abdicate in your favour. I keep house—whatever house is kept—and you'd better shut your eyes and ears to it. It isn't work for you."

"Oh, Aunt Julia!" said Virginia distressed, "I would not think of such a thing. It is your place."

"No, my dear, it's not; but I mean to stick to it," interposed Miss Seyton.

"And I know nothing about housekeeping, I'm afraid. I should be very extravagant."

"Like a true Seyton. So much for that, then. And now another thing. Don't you ever give your brothers so much as a half-sovereign secretly. You have money, and they know it, and it's scarce here. Mind what I say."

A kind of puzzled sense of something that she did not understand crossed Virginia's face.

"I would rather give them things than money," she said. "Of course papa lets them have what is right."

"Of course," said Miss Seyton, with the same perplexing expression of indescribable amusement.

A good joke had for years been the solace, a bitter sarcasm the natural outlet, of a life which certainly had been neither prosperous nor happy in itself, nor glorified by any martyrdom of self-denial.

Miss Seyton was full of malice, both in the French and English acceptations of the word. She loved fun, and she could not see without bitterness the young, unworn creature beside her. To astonish Virginia offered an almost irresistible temptation to both these tendencies. Her evident unconsciousness of the life that lay before her, was at once so funny, and such a cruel satire on them all.

"So you built castles in the air about your relations?" she said, with an odd longing to knock some of these castles down.

"Sometimes," said Virginia; "then Ruth told me about you; and two years ago she and I met Cheriton Lester and his cousin

Rupert in London, and I used to talk to them, Cheriton made me wish to come home very much."

"Why?" said Miss Seyton shortly.

"He used to tell her about the place, and he made me remember much better what it was like."

"Cheriton will have to play second fiddle. The eldest brother is coming back from Spain."

"Ah, I remember, he told us how much he wished it. Oh, and he told me Uncle James 'wasn't half a bad fellow.' I suppose that was a boy's way of saying he was very nice indeed. Perhaps I can help him, too, in the village. I like school-teaching, and I suppose there aren't many young ladies in Elderthwaite?"

"You little innocent!" exclaimed Miss Seyton. Then, moving away, she said, in the same wicked undertone, "Well, you had better ask him."

Virginia remained standing by the fire. She felt ruffled, for she knew herself to be laughed at, and not having the clue to her

aunt's meaning, she fancied that her free and easy mention of Cheriton had elicited the remark; and being a young lady of decided opinions and somewhat warm temper, made up her mind silently, but with energy, that she would never like her Aunt Julia, never! She had been taken away from home when only eleven years old, and since then had only occasionally seen her father and her brothers. Her cousin Ruth, who had frequently stayed at Elderthwaite, had never bestowed on her much definite information; and perhaps the season in London and the renewal of her childish acquaintance with Cheriton Lester had done more than anything else to revive old impressions.

She had been most carefully brought up by her aunt, Lady Hampton, with every advantage of education and influence. Companions and books were all carefully chosen, and her aunt hoped to see her married before there was any chance of her returning to Elderthwaite. But such was the dread of the reckless, defiant,

Seyton nature, that her very precautions defeated their wishes.

Virginia never was allowed to be intimate with any young man but Cheriton, who at the time of their meeting was a mere boy, and with thoughts turned in another direction; and though Virginia was sufficiently susceptible, with a nature at once impetuous and dependent, she came home at one-and-twenty, never yet having seen her ideal in flesh and blood.

"Duties enough, and little cares," had filled her girlhood, and delightful girl friendships and girl reverences had occupied her heart; while her time had been filled by her studies, the cheerful gaieties of a lively neighbourhood, and by the innumerable claims of a church and parish completely organized and vigorously worked.

Lady Hampton was one of the Ladies Bountiful of Littleton; and Virginia had taught in the schools, made tea at the treats, worked at church decorations, and made herself useful and important in all

the ways usual to a clever, warm-hearted girl under such influences. And with the same passionate fervour of nature, and the same necessity to her life of an approving conscience, which had made her mother's heart beat itself to death against the bars of her unsatisfying home, Virginia's nature had flowed on in perfect tune with her surroundings; till, when she was nearly twenty, came the great grief of her kind aunt's death, leaving her heiress to a moderate fortune. By the terms of the will she was to travel under carefully selected guardianship till she was of age, and then to choose whether she would go home to her father, or have a home made for her at Littleton.

Virginia chose promptly, and then, in the delicate, indefinite language of those who fear to do harm by every word, was warned of difficulties. Much would be painful to her, much would be strange; her home was not like anything she had been used to. She listened and looked sad, and understood nothing of what they

meant to imply; and thus ready to admire, but with only one type in her mind of what was admirable; full of love, but with none of the blinding softening memories that make love easy, she came to a home where admiration was impossible, and love would demand either ignorant indifference to any high ideal, or a rare and perfect charity, alike unknown to a high-minded intolerant girl.

CHAPTER VI.

VIRGINIA.

"A sense of mystery her spirit daunted."

THE vicar of Elderthwaite was Mr. Seyton's youngest brother. There had been one between them, the father of the Ruth mentioned in the last chapter, but he had married well, and died early, leaving this one girl, who lived with her grandmother, and paid occasional visits to Elderthwaite.

James Seyton had been the wildest of the three, and had taken orders to pay his debts by means of the family living, the revenues of which he had never fully enjoyed. He had never married, and his life—though just kept in bounds by the times in which he lived, so that he did not get tipsy in the Seyton Arms, nor openly

scandalize a parish with so low a standard of right as Elderthwaite—was a thoroughly self-indulgent one. He read the service once on Sundays, and administered the Communion three times a year, while the delay and neglect of funerals, marriages, and baptisms were the scandal of every parish round. He rarely visited his flock; and yet the vicar was not wholly an unpopular man. He was good-natured, and though he drank freely and sometimes swore loudly, he had a certain amount of secular intercourse with his parishioners of a not unneighbourly kind.

The pressure of poverty made Mr. Seyton a hard landlord, and between oppression and neglect the inhabitants of the picturesque tumbledown village were a bad lot, and neither squire nor parson did much to make them better. But their vicar now and then did put before the worst offenders the consequences of an evil life in language plain enough to reach their understanding; and he had a word and a laugh for most of them.

Mr. Lester was frequently heard to inveigh against Parson Seyton's shortcomings, and seriously, as well he might, regretted the state of Elderthwaite parish; but Mr. Seyton doctored all his horses and dogs when they were ill, and was, "after all, an old neighbour and a gentleman." He taught Cherry to catch rats, and took him out otter-hunting, and there was the oddest friendship between them, which Cherry, when a boy, had once exemplified in the following manner :—

The Bishop had paid an unexpected visit at Oakby, and Cheriton following in the wake, while his father and Mr. Ellesmere were showing off their new schools, heard him express his intention of going on to Elderthwaite; upon which Cherry ran full speed across the fields, found Parson Seyton shooting rabbits, decidedly in shooting costume, gave him timely warning, and, with his own hands so tidied, dusted, and furbished up the wretched old church, that its vicar, entering into the spirit of the thing, fell to with a will, astonished the

lazy blind old sexton, and produced such a result as might pass muster in a necessarily lenient north country diocese.

Cherry then diffidently produced one of his father's white ties which he had put in his pocket, "thinking you mightn't have one clean," and as the old vicar, with a shout of laughter, arrayed himself in it, he said,—

"Ay, ay, my lad, between this and the glass of port I'll give his lordship (he won't better that in any parish), we'll push through."

And so they did.

Parson Seyton was a man, if an erring one; but the mischief with his young nephews was that they seemed to have no force or energy even for being naughty, and as they grew up their scrapes were all those of idle self-indulgence, save when the hereditary passion for gambling broke out in Dick, the elder of the two, as had been the case lately, causing his removal from the tutor with whom he had been placed. Like their father, they had not

strong health, and they had little taste for field sports, and none for books; they lay in bed half the day, lounged about the stables, and quarrelled with each other. But then their father had nothing to do, read little but the paper, and drank a great deal more wine than was good for him.

Their uncle had conferred on them in his time the inestimable advantage of one or two good thrashings, and had scant patience with a kind of evil to which his burly figure, jolly red face, and hearty reckless temper had never been inclined.

Virginia had thought a good deal about her uncle, and was not unprepared to find him very far removed from the clerical ideal to which she was accustomed. Perhaps the notion of bringing a little enlightenment to so "old-fashioned" a place was neither absent nor unwelcome, as she thought of offering to teach the choir, and wondered who was feminine head of the parish.

"I daresay Uncle James has some nice

old housekeeper," she thought, "who trots after the poor people, and takes them jelly, and perhaps teaches the children sewing. There must be a great many people here who remember mamma. I hope they will like me. It will be a much more real thing trying to be helpful here than at Littleton, where there were six people for each bit of work."

Virginia, finding that her brothers did not appear, began to revive her childish recollections by going over the house. It was very large and rambling, with long unused passages, with all the rooms shut up. Windows overgrown with interlacing ivy, panels from which the paint dropped at a touch, queer little turret chambers, with rickety staircases leading up to them, seemed hardly objectionable to Virginia, who liked the romance of the old forlorn house, and had not yet tried living in it. Yet it was not romantic, for Elderthwaite was not ruinous, only very dirty and out of repair; and perhaps the untidy housemaid, whom Virginia had encountered, was really

more in accordance with its condition than the white lady or armed spectre that she gaily thought ought to walk those lonely passages. Her own young smiling face, and warm ruby-coloured dress, was in more startling contrast than either. So apparently thought her brother Dick as he ran up against her on the stairs.

"Hallo, Virginia!" he exclaimed in astonished accents. "What are you doing up here?"

"Trying to remember my way about. Don't we keep any ghosts, Dick? I'm sure they would find these dark corners exactly suited to them."

"Better ask old Kitty; she'll tell you all about them. Good-bye, I'm off," and Dick clattered downstairs, rather to Virginia's disappointment, for she had thought the night before that his delicate, handsome face was more prepossessing than the pale stout one of Harry who now joined her.

"Where is Dick going?" she asked.

"Don't know, I'm sure," said Harry.

"Do you want to know all the old stories?"

"Yes! can you tell me?"

"Do you see that room there?" said Harry, with eyes that twinkled like his aunt's; "old grandfather Seyton was an old rip, you know, if ever there was one, and he and his friends used to make such a row you heard them over at Oakby. *His* brother was parson then, and bless you! Uncle Jem's a bishop to him. Well, he'd got a dozen men dining here, and they all got as drunk as owls, dead drunk every one of them, and the servants put them to bed up in this gallery. One of them was in the room next grandfather's, that room there, and he was found dead the next morning. Fact, I assure you."

"What a horrid story!" said Virginia, looking shocked.

"I'll tell you another. Grandfather and his brother played awfully high, that's how the avenue was cut down; and when they could get no one else they played with each other, and one night they quarrelled and

seized each other by the throats, and they both would have been strangled, only grandmamma rushed in in her nightgown screaming, and parted them; but the parson had the marks on his throat for ever."

"Harry! you naughty boy!" exclaimed Virginia, laughing. "You are inventing all these frightful stories. I don't believe them."

"They're as true as gospel," said Harry, looking at her bright, incredulous eyes. "There's another about the parson—how he came through the park at sunrise. That's not a pretty story to tell you, though."

"I had much rather hear something about the parson, as you call him, nowadays. Come downstairs, it's so cold here, and answer all my questions."

"Oh, the parson's a jolly old card," said Harry, following her. "He's just mad with Dick because he won't hunt. He's been in at the death at every meet round, and don't he swear when any one rides over the dogs, that's all!"

Virginia began to think Elderthwaite must be very old-fashioned indeed.

"Doesn't Dick like hunting?" she said.

"No, Dick takes after the governor. It's cards that'll send him to the devil, and the first Seyton he'll be that's not worth having, says Uncle James."

Harry talked in a low, solemn voice, with the same odd twinkle in his eyes, and it was very difficult to say whether it was wicked mischief, or a sort of shameless *naïveté*, that made him so communicative.

Virginia still strongly suspected him of a desire to astonish her; but his last speech gave her a strange new pang, and she turned away to safer subjects.

"I suppose the Lester boys are friends of yours?"

"Well, that's as may be. We're such a bad lot, you see, that Bob's never allowed to come here. There was a row once, and old Lester, a humbugging chap, just interfered. Jack's such a confounded prig he wouldn't touch us with a pair of tongs."

"And Cheriton, of course, is too old for you."

"Cherry! oh, he isn't a bad fellow. I go over to Oakby sometimes when he's there. But it's a slow place, and old Lester keeps them very tight. And then he's always humbugging after his schools and things. Writing to my father about the state of the village. As if it was his affair!" said Harry, in a tone of virtuous indignation.

"Doesn't papa approve of education?" said Virginia.

"Bless you, he don't trouble his head about it. Why should he? Teach a lot of poaching vagabonds to read and write!"

"But Uncle James—"

"Oh, Uncle James," said Harry, with a spice of mimicry, "he likes his glass of grog and his ferrets too well to put himself out of the way. By Jove, here's Aunt Julia! I shall be off before I'm asked what has become of Dick."

Virginia sat still where he had left her.

She only half believed him, and strange to say there was something so comical in his manner that she was rather attracted by its cool sauciness. But she was frightened and perplexed. What sort of a world was this into which she had come? Those stories, even if true, happened a long time ago; Harry must be in joke about Dick, and everything was different nowadays.

It was true. The golden age, if such an expression can be permitted, of Seyton wickedness had passed away; and these were smaller times, times of neglect, mismanagement, and low poor living, the dreary dregs of a cup long since drained. Nobody could quote Mr. Seyton as a monster of wickedness, because he dawdled away his time over his sherry, and knew no excitement but an occasional game of cards at not very high stakes. There was many another youth in Westmoreland who gambled and played billiards in low company like Dick, and some ladies perhaps who found all their excitement in

the memory of other times, and troubled themselves as little over any question of conscience as Miss Seyton.

But it was not all at once that this absence of all that makes life worth living could be apparent, and Virginia found her first confirmation of Harry's words as she walked through the village on Christmas morning, and noted the wild, untidy look of the people, and the wretched state of their houses, and observed the sullen look of their faces as her father passed. Dick did not appear at all; Harry audibly "supposed the governor was going to church because Virginia was there," and certainly church-going did not appear to be a fashion of the village.

Neither her childish recollections, nor Harry's remarks, had prepared her, as they came into the small, ivy-grown church, for broken floors, cracked windows, and damp fustiness; still less for the very scantiest of congregations, and a rustling silence where responses should have been. Her uncle read the service rapidly, with the

broad northern accent now strange to her ears. The old clerk trotted about whenever his services were not required, and did a little sweeping. Her uncle paused as he began the Litany, and called to him in a loud and cheerful voice to shut the door.

Virginia peeped out between the faded green-baize curtains that, hanging round the great square pew, represented to her every Church principle she had been taught to condemn; and found her view obstructed by a large cobweb. Harry poked at the spider, and Virginia recalling her own attention from her despairing visions of having no better church than this, perceived that her father was leaning idly back in his corner. All her standards of right and wrong seemed confused and shocked; so much so that, at the moment, she hardly distinguished the pain of finding herself left alone after the sermon, and seeing her father turn away, from her horror at her uncle's dirty surplice, and the dreary degradation of the whole

place. When the parson came after her after service, and loudly told her she was the prettiest lass he'd seen for long enough, kissing her under the church porch, she still felt as if the typical bad parish priest of her imagination had come to life, and behold he was her own uncle!

Since this comprehensible form of evil was so plain to her eyes, what terrible secrets might not lurk behind it! Virginia felt as if she would never be light-hearted again.

CHAPTER VII.

FIRE AND SNOW.

"A northern Christmas, such as painters love.
* * * * *
Red sun, blue sky, white snow, and pearled ice,
Keen ringing air which sets the blood on fire."

CHRISTMAS is no doubt, theoretically, the right season for relations who have been long parted to meet, and there was an ideal appropriateness in the long absent heir appearing at Oakby for the first time on Christmas Day. But practically it would have been better for Alvar if he had come home at any other time of the year. In the first place the frost continued with unabated severity, and precluded every out-door amusement but skating, in which Alvar of course had no

skill, and which he did not seem at all willing to learn. Besides, the season brought an amount of local and parish business which Mr. Lester attended to vigorously in person, but the existence of which Alvar never seemed to realize. His grandmother's charities he understood, and was rather amused at seeing the old women come to fetch their blankets and cloaks; but what could he have to do with any of these people?

Tenants' dinners and choir-suppers might form a good opportunity for introducing him to his neighbours; and Cheriton, who was the life and soul of such festivities, tried to put him forward; but he only made magnificent silent bows, and comported himself much as his brother Jack had done, when in an access of gruff shyness and democratic ardour he had called the Christmas feasts "relics of feudalism," and had shown his advanced notions of the union of classes by never speaking a word to any one.

Between the new comer and his father

there was an impassable distance. Alvar never failed in courtesy; but Cheriton's quick eyes soon perceived that he resented deeply the long neglect; saw too that the sight of him was a pain and distress to his father, sharpened his temper, and produced constant rubs; though he was careful to do everything that the proper introduction of his son demanded of him. A grand ball was organized in his honour, and also a stiff and ponderous dinner-party at which Alvar was to be introduced to the county magnates.

Special invitations were also sent to him by their various neighbours, and he created quite an excitement in the dull country neighbourhood. Mr. Lester only half liked being congratulated on his son's charming foreign manners; but still, as a novelty, Alvar had great attractions, and in society never seemed shy or at a loss. Mr. Lester's brother-in-law, Judge Cheriton, invited the stranger to pay him a visit when the season had a little advanced, and to let him see a little London society;

for which attention Mr. Lester, who hated London, was very grateful, as Alvar's grandfather had Spanish friends there, and it would have been too intolerable for the heir of Oakby to have appeared there under auspices which, however distinguished, Mr. Lester thought suitable only to a political refugee or a music master.

He had, when he had ceased to pay for Alvar's English tutor, made him an allowance which had been magnificent in Spain, and greatly added to Alvar's consideration there, and he now increased this to what he considered a sufficient sum for his eldest son's dignity. In short he did everything but overcome his personal distaste to him; he never willingly spoke to him, and the very sight of him was an irritation to him. He got less too than usual of Cheriton's company; their walks, and talks, and consultations were curtailed by Alvar's requirements. Indeed Cherry was pulled in many different directions, and he ended by sacrificing all the reading that was to have been got through during

the vacation. For the home life was very difficult, and the more they saw of the stranger the less they liked him.

"He's not of our sort," said Bob, as if that settled the matter, not perceiving that his slowness to receive impressions, and difficulty in accommodating himself to a new life, might spring as much from his Lester blood as from his Spanish breeding.

"He might try and *look* like an Englishman," growled Jack.

"When you go to Spain, we shall see you in a *sombrero* dancing under the orange-trees to a pair of castanets," retorted Cheriton. "*We* should all be so ready at foreign languages and so accommodating, shouldn't we?"

Alvar's individuality was not to be ignored, though unfortunately it was very distasteful to his kindred. He was so dignified, so terribly polite they were half afraid of him, and as the awe wore off, they wanted to quarrel with him. He announced that he loved riding, and seemed to know something of horses; he

played billiards much too well to be a pleasant opponent to his father, he sang much too quaintly and prettily for his family to appreciate, and he played the guitar! Even Cheriton wished it had been a fiddle. He hated going to walk, smoked incessantly, and was indifferent to every one except Cheriton, to whom he deferred in everything.

Poor Cheriton! "Among the blind, the one-eyed is king," and his sentiments were amazingly liberal for Oakby; but he was very young and deeply attached to his home and his surroundings, too tender-hearted not to be touched at Alvar's preference, imaginative enough to realize his position, and yet repelled and put out of countenance by his peculiarities. To be tenderly addressed as "my brother," "mi caro," "mi Cheri*ton*," "Cherito mio," to be deferred to on all occasions, and even told in the hearing of Jack and Bob "that his eyes when he laughed were the colour of the Mediterranean on a sunny day," was, as he said, "so out-facing, that it

made him feel a perfect fool," especially when his brothers echoed it at every turn.

Yet he put up with it. It was so hard on the poor fellow if no one was kind to him! So hard, he added to himself, to be an unloved and unloving son.

Perhaps, after all, Alvar's essential strangeness prevented Cheriton from feeling himself put aside.

Cheriton was very popular at school and at college. He had strong intellectual ambitions, and though of less powerful mind than Jack, had attained to much graceful scholarship and possessed much command of language. He hoped to take honours, to go to the bar, and distinguish himself there under his uncle, Judge Cheriton's, auspices. He had too a further and a sweeter hope, hitherto confided to no one.

But it was a certain "genius for loving" that really distinguished him from his fellows—really made him every one's friend. He did not seek out his poorer neighbours so much from a sense of duty,

as because his heart went out to every one belonging to Oakby, nay, every animal, every bit of ground—nothing was a trouble that conduced to the welfare of the place. This loving-kindness was a natural gift; but Cheriton made good use of it. He had high principles, and deep within his soul, struggling with the temptations of this ardent nature, were the pure aspirations and the capability of fervent piety which have made saints—responsibilities with which he was born.

But all this fire and force did not make tolerance easy; he was full of instinctive prejudices, and perhaps his greatest aids in his dealings with his new brother were his joyous unchecked spirits and the keen sense of the ludicrous that enabled him to laugh at himself as well as at other people.

Some little time after Alvar's arrival there was a deep fall of snow, and while the pond was being swept for skating, the young Lesters, with Harry Seyton and the children from the rectory, who had come up for the purpose, proceeded to erect a

snow man of gigantic proportions in front of the house.

"What a fright you have made of him!" said Cheriton, coming up with Alvar as they finished; "he has no nose and no expression."

"Well, come and do his nose, then; it keeps on coming off," said Nettie, who was standing on a bench to put the finishing touches.

Cherry was nothing loath, and was soon engaged in moulding the snowy countenance with the skill of long practice, while Alvar, with his great crimson-lined cloak wrapped about him, stood looking on.

"Give him a good *lumpy* nose, that won't melt," said Cherry. "There, he's lovely! got an old pipe for him?"

As he spoke a great snow-ball came stinging against his face, and in a moment, to the astonishment of Alvar, the whole party set on Cherry, and a wild bout of snow-balling ensued.

"No, no, that's not fair! I can't fight you all," shouted Cherry; "and you've

got all your snow-balls ready made. Give me the girls, and then—Come on."

"Oh, yes, yes; we'll be on Cherry's side," cried Nettie.

It was a picturesque scene enough—the pale blue sky overhead, the dazzling snow under foot, the little girls in their scarlet cloaks or petticoats, their long hair flying as they darted in and out, the great boys struggling, wrestling, knocking each other about with small mercy. No one threw a snowball at Alvar; perhaps they had forgotten him, as he stood silently watching them as if they were a troop of Berserkers, till the contest terminated in a tremendous struggle between Cheriton and Jack, who were, of course, much the biggest of the party. Cherry was getting decidedly the worst of it, and either tripped in the rough snow or was thrown down into it by Jack, when suddenly Alvar threw off his cloak, stepped forward, and seizing Jack by the shoulders, pulled him back with sudden irresistible force.

"By Jove!" was all that Jack could utter.

"What on earth did you do that for?" ejaculated Cherry as soon as he gained his breath and his feet.

"He might have hurt you, my brother," said Alvar, who looked flushed, and for once excited. "And besides, I am stronger than either of you. I could struggle with you both."

"Hurt me? Suppose he had?" said Cherry disdainfully. "But, Jack—Jack, I do believe you're getting too many for me at last."

"That is what you call athletics," said Alvar, who looked unusually bright.

"Yes; wrestling is a regular north country game, and the fellows about here have taught us all the tricks of it. Come, Jack, let us show him a bout."

The two brothers pulled off their coats, and set to with a will; and after a long struggle, and with considerable difficulty, Cheriton succeeded in throwing Jack.

"There, I've done it once more!" he said breathlessly, "and I don't suppose I shall ever do it again. You're getting

much stronger than I am, and of course you're heavier."

"Let me try to throw you down," said Alvar eagerly.

"Nay, Jack may have first turn; but it's fair to tell you there's a great deal of knack in it."

Alvar, however, was man instead of boy; he was quite as tall as Jack, and however he might have learnt to exercise his muscles, his grasp was like steel; and though Jack's superior skill triumphed in the end, Alvar rose up cool and smiling, and Jack panted out, in half-unwilling admiration,—

"You'd beat us all with a little training."

"Ah yes; that is because I am an Englishman," said Alvar complacently. "But I bear no malice, Jack. It is in sport."

"Of course," said Jack. "Now, Cherry, you try."

"It's hardly fair in a biting frost," said Cherry; "nobody can have any wind.

However, here's for the honour of Westmoreland."

The younger ones gathered round in an admiring circle, and Cheriton, who did not like to be beaten, put forth all the strength and skill of which he was master. But he was the more slightly made, and had met his match, and to the extreme chagrin of his brothers and Nettie, sustained an entire defeat.

"Well, I never thought you would throw *him*," said Jack, in a tone of deep disappointment.

"Ah," said Alvar, "they always called me the strong Englishman."

"Papa was the strongest man in Westmoreland," said Nettie.

"Then," said Alvar, "so far I have proved myself his son, and your brother. I would not skate with you, for I should look like a fool; but I knew you could not easily throw me down, since that is your sport. But, my brother, I have hurt you."

"No," said Cheriton getting up, "only

knocked all the wind out of me, and made *me* look like a fool! Never mind, we shall understand each other all the better. Come upstairs, and we will show you some of the cups and things we have won in boat-races and athletics."

This was a clever stroke of Cheriton's; he wanted to make Alvar free of the premises, and had not yet found a good excuse. So, leaving the younger ones to finish their snow-balling, he and Jack conducted Alvar up to the top of the house, where, at the end of the passage where they slept, was a curious low room, with a long, low window, looking west, above the west window of the drawing-room, and occupying nearly one side of the room, almost like the windows of the hand-loom weavers in the West Riding.

There was a low seat underneath, broad enough to lie on, but furnished with very dilapidated cushions. There was a turning-lathe in the room, and a cupboard for guns, and sundry cases of stuffed birds, one table covered with tools, glue-pots,

and messes of all descriptions; and another, it is but justice to add, supplied with ink, pens, and paper, and various formidable-looking books, for here the boys did their reading. There was a great, old-fashioned grate with a blazing fire in it, and very incongruous ornaments above it —a stuffed dormouse, Nettie's property— she maintained a footing in the room by favour—various pipes, two china dogs, white, with brown spots on them, presented to Cherry in infancy by his nurse, and a wooden owl carved by their cousin Rupert—a cousin in the second degree, who had been much with them owing to his father's early death. On one side of the room were arranged on a sort of sideboard the cups and tankards which were the trophies of the brothers' prowess, and these were now each pointed out to Alvar, and the circumstances of their acquisition described. Cheriton's were fewer in proportion, and chiefly for leaping and hurdle-racing; and Jack explained that Cherry's forte was

cricket, and that, since he had once knocked himself up at school by a tremendous flat-race, their father had greatly objected to his going into training.

"Oh, it's not that," said Cherry; "he would not care now; but I really haven't time. I must grind pretty hard from now to midsummer."

"There is one thing I have read of," said Alvar, "in English newspapers. It is a race of boats on the Thames between Oxford and Cambridge."

"Oh, yes, you must go and see it. That's Jack's ambition—to be one of the crew."

"Ah, but you see there's no river at R——, and that's so unlucky," said Jack seriously.

And so what with explanations and questions the ice melted a little. Alvar looked smiling and beneficent; he did not seem at all ashamed of his own ignorance; and Jack evidently regarded him with a new respect.

Cheriton also contrived that the Seytons,

with the vicar of Oakby, Mr. Ellesmere and his wife, should be asked to dinner; and as the vicar had some general conversation, some information about Spain was elicited from Alvar, who, moreover, was pleased to find himself in ladies' society, and was evidently at ease in it; while Virginia, in exchange for the pleasant talk that seemed to come out of her old life, could tell Cheriton that her cousin Ruth was coming to stay with her, and could confide in him that home was still a little strange.

"Well, strangers *are* strange," said Cherry. "*We* are shaking down, but the number of tempers lost in the process might be advertised for 'as of no value except to the owners,' if to them. Only the home-made article, you understand—"

"Dear me," said Virginia, "I should as soon think of losing my temper with the Cid. Aren't you afraid of him?"

Cheriton made an irresistibly ludicrous face.

"Don't tell," he said, "but I think we are; and yet, you know, we think 'yon

soothern chap,' as old Bates called him, must be 'a bit of a softy' after all."

"Oh, Cherry, that is how you talked yourself when we were children," exclaimed Virginia impulsively. "Do you know I *feel* I was born here, when I hear the broad Westmoreland. I never forgot it."

"Nay, I'm glad you don't say I talk so now," said Cherry. "They tell me at Oxford that my tongue always betrays me when I am excited. But here comes Alvar; now make him fall in love with Westmoreland. Alvar, Miss Seyton *has* been abroad, so *she* is not quite a benighted savage."

"My brother Cheriton is not a savage," said Alvar, smiling, as Cherry moved away. "He is the kindest and most beautiful person I have ever seen."

"Yes, he is very kind. But I hope, Mr. Lester, that you do not think us *all* savages, with that one exception."

"In future I can never think so," said Alvar, with a bow. "These boys are

savage certainly—very savage, but I do not care."

"It is strange, is it not," said Virginia, rather timidly, "to have to make acquaintance with one's own father?"

"Of my father I say nothing," said Alvar, with a sudden air of hauteur, that made the impulsive Virginia blush, and feel as if she had taken a liberty with him, till he added, with a smile, "Miss Seyton, too, I hear, is a stranger."

"Yes, I have been away ever since I was a little girl, and—and I had forgotten my relations."

"I have not known mine," said Alvar; "Cheriton wrote to me once a little letter. I have it now, and since then I have loved him. I do not know the rest, and they wish I was not here."

"But don't you think," said Virginia earnestly, "that we—that you will soon feel more at home with them?"

"Oh, I do not know," said Alvar, with a shrug. "It is cold, and I am so dull that I could die. They understand no-

thing. And in Spain I was the chief; I could do what I wished. Here I must follow and obey. My name even is different. I do not know "Mr. Lester." I am "Don Alvar." Will you not call me so?"

"But that would be so very strange to me," said Virginia, parrying this request. "Every one will call you Mr. Lester. How tall Nettie is grown. Do you not think her very pretty?"

"Oh, she is pink, and white, and blue, and yellow; but she is like a little boy. There is not in her eyes the attraction, the coquetry, which I admire," said Alvar, pointing his remark with a glance at his companion's lucid, beaming, interested eyes, in which however there was little conscious coquetry.

"I am sorry to hear you admire coquettes," was too obvious an answer to be resisted.

"Nay, it is the privilege of beauty," said Alvar.

Virginia, like many impulsive people, was apt to recollect with a cold chill con-

versations by which at the time she had been entirely carried away. But on looking back at this one she liked it. Alvar's dignity and grace of manner made his trifling compliments both flattering and respectful. His feelings, too, she thought, were evidently deep and tender; and how she pitied him for his solitary condition!

CHAPTER VIII.

A DAY OF REST.

"Gaily the troubadour touched his guitar."

On the third Sunday morning after Alvar's arrival, Mr. Lester came down as usual at the sound of the gong, and as he glanced round the dining-room missed his two elder sons.

Prayers were over and breakfast had begun before Alvar entered.

"Ah pardon," he said, bowing to his grandmother; "I did not know it was late."

"I make a point of being punctual on Sunday," said Mr. Lester, in a tone of incipient displeasure.

"Cheriton is late too," said Alvar.

"No," said Jack, "he's gone to Church."

"Ah, then *we* do not go to-day," said Alvar, with an air of relief so comical that even the solemn Jack could hardly stand it.

"Oh, yes, we do," he said, "this is extra."

"Cheriton," said Mr. Lester, "is very attentive to his religious duties."

"I suppose he'll have breakfast at the Vicarage," said Nettie, as Alvar raised his eyebrows and gave a little shrug.

It was a gesture habitual to him, and was not intended to express contempt either for religion or for Cheriton, but only a want of comprehension of the affair; but it annoyed Mr. Lester and called his attention to the fact that Alvar had appeared in a black velvet coat of a peculiar foreign cut, the sight of which he disliked on a week-day, and considered intolerable when it was contrasted with the spruce neatness of the rest of the party. He could not very well attack Alvar on the subject, but he sharply reproved Bob for cutting hunches of bread when no one

wanted them, and found fault with the coffee. And then, apparently *à propos* of nothing, he began to make a little speech about the importance of example in a country place, and the influence of trifles.

"And I can assure *every one* present," he concluded emphatically, "that there is no need to look far for an example of the evil effects of neglect in these particulars."

"Elderthwaite?" whispered Nettie to Jack.

"Ay," said Mrs. Lester, "young people should show respect to Sunday morning. It is what in my father's house was always insisted on. Your grandfather, too, used to say that he liked his dogs even to know Sunday."

"It is strange to me," said Alvar coolly.

"It will be well that you should give yourself the pains to become accustomed to it," said his father curtly.

It was the first time that the stately stranger had been addressed in such a tone, and he looked up with a flash of the eye that startled the younger ones.

"Sir, it is by your will I am a stranger here," he said, with evident displeasure.

"Stranger or no, my regulations must be respected," said Mr. Lester, his colour rising.

Alvar rose from his seat and proved his claim at any rate to the family temper by bowing to his grandmother and marching out of the room.

"Highty tighty!" said the grandmother. "Here's a spirt of temper for you!"

"Intolerable insolence!" exclaimed Mr. Lester. "Under my roof he must submit to what I please to say to him."

"It's just what I told ye, Gerald; a foreigner's ways are what we cannot do with," said Mrs. Lester.

"Of course," blurted out Jack, with the laudable desire of mending matters; "of course he is a foreigner. How can you expect him to be anything else? And father never said it was his coat."

"His coat?" said Mr. Lester. "It is his temper to which I object. When he came I told him that I expected

Sunday to be observed in my house, and he agreed."

"But he did not understand that you thought that coat improper on Sunday," said Jack with persevering justice.

"I am not in the habit of being obscure," said Mr. Lester, as he rose from the table, while Jack thought he would give Alvar a little good advice.

Cherry was too soft; he was equally impartial, and would be more plain spoken. But as he approached the library he heard an ominous tinkling, and entering, beheld Alvar, still in the objection able coat, beginning to play on the still more objectionable guitar, an air which Jack did not think sounded like a hymn tune.

Jack really intended to mend matters, but his manner was unfortunate, and in the tone he would have used to a disobedient fag he remarked, as he stood bolt upright beside his brother,—

"I say, Alvar, I think you'd better not play on that thing this morning."

"There is no reason for you to tell me what to do," said Alvar quietly.

"It's not, you know," said Jack, "that *I* think there's any harm in it. *My* views are very liberal. I only think it's a frivolous and unmanly sort of instrument; but the governor won't like it, and there'll be no end of a row."

"You have not a musical soul," said Alvar loftily, for he had had time to cool down somewhat.

"*Certainly* not," said the liberal Jack, with unnecessary energy and a tone of disgust; "but that's not the question. It's not the custom here to play *that sort of thing on a thing like that* on a Sunday morning. Ask Cherry."

"Would it vex my brother?" asked Alvar.

"If you mean Cheriton, it certainly would. He hates a row."

"A row?" said the puzzled Alvar, "that is a noise—my guitar?"

"Oh, hang it! no, a quarrel," began Jack, when suddenly—

"Sir, I consider this an act of defiance; I beg I may see that instrument put away at once," and Mr. Lester's voice took the threatening sound that made his anger always appear so much worse than it really was. "I will have the proprieties of my house observed, and no example of this kind set to your younger brothers."

Alvar had taken Jack's interference with cool contempt, but now he started up with a look of such passion as fairly subdued Jack into a hasty—

"Oh come, come, I say, now—don't!"

Alvar controlled himself suddenly and entirely.

"Sir, I obey my father's commands. I will say good morning," and taking up his guitar went up to his own room, from which he did not emerge at church time, and as no one ventured to call him they set off without him. Among themselves they might quarrel and make it up again many times a day, but Alvar's feelings were evidently more serious.

It was occasionally Cheriton's practice

to sing in the choir, more for the popularity of his example than for his voice, which was indifferent. Alvar had been greatly puzzled at his doing so, and had then told him that "in that white robe he looked like the picture of an angel," a remark which so discomfited Cherry that he had further perplexed his unlucky brother by saying,—

"*Pray* don't say such a thing to the others, I should never hear the last of it. You'd better say I look like an ass at once."

He did not therefore see anything of his family till he met them after the service, when Jack attacked him.

"What induced you to go out this morning? Everything has gone utterly wrong, and I shouldn't wonder if we should find Alvar gone back to Spain."

"Why, what's the matter?"

"Alvar came down late in that ridiculous coat and then played the guitar. And if ever you saw a fellow in a passion! He likes his own way."

"Was father angry?"

"I should just think so. I don't expect they'll speak."

This was a pleasant prospect. Cheriton saw that his father's brow was cloudy, and as he went upstairs his grandmother called him into her room.

"Cheriton," she said mysteriously, as she sat down and untied her bonnet, "Jack has told you of your brother's behaviour, and it's my belief there's a clue to it, and I hope you'll take warning, for I sometimes think ye've a hankering after that way yourself."

"What way, grandmamma? I never play the guitar on a Sunday morning."

"Nay, but there's more behind. It's well known how Sunday is profaned in Popish countries. I've heard they keep the shops open in France. Your brother has been brought up among Papists, and it would be a sad thing for your father's son to give all this property into the hands of the priests."

"Dear me, granny, what a frightful suggestion. But I'm sure Alvar has no

Romish sympathies. He has no turn for anything of the kind, and I should think the Roman Church was very unattractive in Spain."

"Ay, but they're very deep."

"Well," said Cherry, "if Alvar is a Jesuit in disguise, as you say, and rather a dissipated person, as my father seems to think, and has such an appalling temper as Jack describes, we're in a bad way. I think I'll go and see for myself."

When Cherry entered Alvar's room he found this alarming compound of qualities sitting by the fire looking forlorn and lonely.

"Why, Alvar, what's all this about?"

"Ah, my brother," said Alvar, "you were absent and all has been wrong. My father is offended with me. I know not why. He insulted me."

"Oh, nonsense! we never talk about being insulted. My father's a little hasty, but he means nothing by it. What did you do that annoyed him?"

"I played my guitar and Jack scolded me. No one shall do so but you."

"I daresay Jack made an ass of himself —he often does; but he is a thorough good fellow at bottom. You know we do get up in our best clothes on Sunday."

"I can do that," said Alvar, "but your Sunday I do not understand. You tell me I may not play at cards or at billiards; you do not dance nor go to the theatre. What good does it do? I would go to church, though it is tiresome, and I shudder at the singing. It is a mark, doubtless, of my father's politics; but at home—well, I can smoke, if that is better?"

Driven back to first principles, Cheriton hardly knew what to say. "Of course," he answered. "I have often heard the matter discussed, and I don't pretend to say that at Oxford the best of us are as particular as we might be. But in a country place like this, carelessness would do infinite harm. And, on the whole, I shouldn't like the rule to be otherwise."

"Alvar sighed, and made no answer.

"But," continued Cherry, "I think no

one has a right to impose rules on you. I wouldn't bring out the guitar in the morning—it looks rather odd, you know—nor wear that coat. But we're not so very strict; there are always newspapers about, and novels, and, as you say, you can smoke or talk, or play the piano—I'm sure no one would know what the tune was—or write letters. Really, it might be worse, you know."

Perhaps Cherry's coaxing voice and eyes were more effectual than his arguments; any way, Alvar said, "Well, I will offer my hand to my father, if he will take it."

"Oh, no; pray don't make a scene about it. There's the gong. Put on your other coat, and come down. We *do* eat our dinner on Sunday, and I'm awfully hungry."

Whether Mr. Lester accepted the coat as a flag of truce, or whether he did not wish to provoke a contest with an unknown adversary, nothing more was said; but Alvar's evil star was in the ascendant, and

he was destined to run counter to his family in a more unpardonable way.

He had no sympathy whatever with the love for animals, which was perhaps the softest side of his rough kindred. All the English Lesters were imbued with that devotion to live creatures which is ingrain with some natures. No trouble was too great to take for them. Bob and Nettie got up in the morning and went out in all weathers to feed their ferrets, or their jackdaws, or whatever pet was young, sick, or troublesome. Cheriton's great St. Bernard, Rolla, ranked somewhere very near Jack in his affections, and had been taught, trained, beaten, and petted, till he loved his master with untiring devotion. Mrs. Lester had her chickens and turkeys, Mr. Lester his prize cattle and his horses, some of the latter old and well-tried friends.

It must be admitted that Oakby was a trying place for people devoid of this sentiment. Every one had a dog, more or less valuable, and jackdaws and magpies have

their drawbacks as members of a family. Alvar openly said that he had never seen anybody make pets of dumb animals, and that he could not understand doing so; and though he took no notice of them, Rolla and an old pointer of Mr. Lester's, called Rose, had already been thrashed for growling at him.

On this particular Sunday afternoon, the bright cold weather clouded over and promised a thaw. Alvar preferred dulness to the weather out-of-doors, and Cheriton accompanied his father on the Sunday stroll, which included all the beasts on the premises, and generally ended in visits to the old keeper and coachman, who thought it the height of religious advantage to hear the squire read a chapter.

Mr. Lester was aware that he had been impatient with his son, and that Alvar could not be expected to be imbued with an instinctive knowledge of those forms of religion with which his father had been inspired by his young brilliant wife, when "Fanny" had taught him to restore his

church and build his schools in a fuller fashion than had satisfied his father, and made him believe that his position demanded of himself and his family a personal participation in all good works —some control of them he naturally desired.

He was, as Mr. Ellesmere said, with a little shrug, when forced to yield a point, "a model squire," conscientious and open-handed, but unpersuadable. Perhaps the clear-eyed, wide-souled Fanny might have allowed more readily for the necessary changes of twenty years. Certainly she would better have appreciated a newcomer's difficulties; while poor Mr. Lester felt that Fanny's ideal was invaded, and not by Fanny's son. It spoilt his walk with Cheriton, and made him reply sharply to the latter's attempts at agreeable conversation. Cheriton at length left him at the old gamekeeper's; and while Mr. Lester's irritable accents were softened into kindly inquiries for the old father, now pensioned off, he chatted to the son, at present in

command, who had been taking care of a terrier puppy for him.

Finding that Buffer, so called from his prevailing colour, was looking strong and lively, Cheriton thought it would be as well to accustom him to society, and took him back to the house. He could not help wondering what would become of Alvar when he was left alone at Oakby. Another fortnight would hardly be sufficient to give him any comfortable, independent habits; how could he endure such deadly dulness as the life there would bring him? That fortnight would be lively enough, and there would be his cousin, Rupert Lester, for an additional companion, and another Miss Seyton, more attractive than Virginia, for an occasional excitement. If Alvar was so fascinating a person to young ladies, would he—would she—? An indefinite haze of questions pervaded Cheriton's mind, and as he reckoned over the county beauties whom he could introduce to Alvar, and whom he would surely admire more than just the one particular beauty who

had first occurred to his thoughts, he reached the house. He found his brothers and Nettie alone in the library, Alvar sitting apart in the window, and looking out at the stormy sky.

"Hallo!" said Jack, "so you have brought Buffer up. Well, he has grown a nice little chap."

"Yes, I thought it was time he should begin his education. Nice head, hasn't he? He is just like old Peggy."

"Yes, he'll be a very good dog some day."

"Set him down," said Bob; "let's have a look at him."

"Little darling!" said Nettie, enthusiastically.

Buffer was duly examined, and then, as Cherry turned to the fire to warm himself, observing that it was colder than ever, began to play about the room, while they entered on a discussion of the merits of all his relations up to their dim recollection of his great-grandmother.

Buffer made himself much at home,

poked about the room, and at last crossed over to Alvar, who had sat on, unheeding his entrance. Buffer gave his trousers a gentle pull. Alvar shook him off. Here was another tiresome little beast; then, just as Cherry crossed over to the window in search of him, he made a dart at Alvar's foot and bit it sharply. Alvar sprang up with a few vehement Spanish words, gave the little dog a rough kick, and then dashed it away from him with a gesture of fierce annoyance. Buffer uttered a howl of pain.

"I say, that's too rough," exclaimed Cherry, snatching up the puppy, which cried and moaned.

"But it bit me!" said Alvar, angrily.

"I believe you have killed him," said Cheriton.

"You cruel coward," cried Nettie, bursting into a storm of tears.

Alvar stood facing all the four, their blue eyes flashing scorn and indignation; but, angry as they were, they were too practical to waste time in reproaches.

Jack brought a light, and Bob, whose skill in such matters equalled his literary incapacity, felt Buffer's limbs scientifically.

"No ribs broken," he said; "he's bruised, though, poor little beggar! Ah! he has put his shoulder out. Now, Cherry, if your hand's going to shake, give him to Jack. I'll pull it in again."

"I can hold him steady," said Alvar, in a low voice.

"No, thank you," said Cherry, curtly, as Jack put a hand to steady his hold, and the operation was performed amid piteous shrieks from Buffer. Alvar had the sense to watch them in silence. What had he done? A kick and a blow to any domestic animal was common enough in Spain. And now he had roused all this righteous indignation, and, far worse, offended Cherry, and seen his distress at the little animal's suffering, and at its cause. Buffer was no sooner laid in Nettie's arms to be cossetted and comforted, than he seized Cherry's hand.

"Ah, my brother! I did not know the

little dog was yours. I would not touch him—"

"What difference does that make?" said Cherry, shaking him off and walking away.

"I shall keep *my* dog out of his way," said Bob, contemptuously.

"I suppose Spaniards are savages," said Jack, in a tone of deadly indignation.

"He'd better play a thousand guitars than hurt a poor little innocent puppy!" said Nettie, half sobbing.

Alvar stood looking mournfully before him; his anger had died out; he looked almost ready to cry with perplexity.

Cheriton turned round. "I won't have a fuss made," he said. "Take Buffer upstairs to my room, and don't say a word to any one. It can't be helped."

"I know *who* I shall never say a word to," said Nettie; but she obeyed, followed by Jack and Bob. Alvar detained Cheriton.

"Oh, my brother, forgive me. I would have broken my own arm sooner than see your eyes look at me thus. It is with us

a word and a blow. I will never strike any little beast again—never."

He looked so wretched that Cheriton answered reluctantly, "I don't mean to say any more about it."

"But you are angry still?"

"No, I'm not angry. I suppose you feel differently. I hate to see anything suffer."

"And I to see you suffer, my brother."

"I? nonsense! I tell you that's nothing to do with it. There, let it drop. I shall say no more."

He escaped, unable further to satisfy his brother, and went upstairs, where Buffer had been put to bed comfortably.

"Did you ever know such a nasty trick in your life?" said Jack, as they left the twins to watch the invalid's slumbers.

"Oh!" said Cherry, turning into his room, "it's all hopeless and miserable. We shall never come to any good—never!"

"Oh, come, come now, Cherry," said Jack, for once assuming the office of consoler. "Buffer 'll do well enough; don't be so despairing."

Cheriton had much the brighter and serener nature of the two; but he was subject to fits of reaction, when Jack's cooler temperament held its own.

"It's not Buffer," he said, "it's Alvar! How can one ever have any brotherly feeling for a fellow like that? He's as different as a Red Indian!"

"It would be very odd and unnatural if you had much brotherly feeling for him," said Jack. "Why do you trouble yourself about him?"

"But he does seem to have taken a sort of fancy to me, and the poor fellow's a stranger!"

"You're a great deal too soft about him. Of course he likes you, when you're always looking him up. Don't be superstitious about it—he's only our half-brother; and don't go down to tea looking like that, or you'll have the governor asking what's the matter with you."

"Remember, I'll not have a word said about it," said Cheriton emphatically.

Nothing was said publicly about it, but Alvar was made to feel himself in disgrace, and endeavoured to re-ingratiate himself with Cherry with a simplicity that was irresistible. He asked humbly after Buffer's health, and finally presented him with a silver chain for a collar.

When Buffer began to limp about on three legs, his tawny countenance looking out above the silver engraved heart that clasped the collar with the sentimental leer peculiar to puppyhood, the effect was sufficiently ludicrous; but he forgave Alvar sooner than his brothers did, and perhaps grateful for his finery, became rather fond of him.

CHAPTER IX.

RUTH.

"She has two eyes so soft and brown."

THERE was a little oak-panelled bedroom at Elderthwaite, which had been called Ruth's ever since, as a curly-haired, brown-skinned child, the little orphan cousin had come from her grandmother's in London and paid a long visit in the North some five or six years before the winter's day on which she now occupied it, when she came to be present at the Lesters' ball. She was a nut-brown maid still, with rough, curly hair and great dark eyes, with curly, upturned lashes—eyes that were like Virginia's in shape, colour, and fervour, but which glanced and gleamed and melted

after a fashion wholly their own. She was slender and small, and though with no wonderful beauty of feature or perfection of form, whether she sat or stood she made a picture; all colours that she wore became her, all scenes set off her peculiar grace. Now, her brown velvet dress, her rusty hair against the dark oak shutter, as she sat crouched up in the window-seat, were a perfect "symphony in brown."

Ruth Seyton was an orphan, and lived with her grandmother, Lady Charlton, a gentle, worldly old lady, whose great object was to see her well married, and to steer her course safely through all the dangers that might affect the course of a well-endowed and very attractive girl. The scorn which Ruth felt for the shallow feelings and worldly notions with which she was expected to enter on the question of her own future was justifiable enough, and led to a violent reaction and to a fervour of false romance. Ruth had found her hero and formulated her view of life, and the hero was Rupert Lester, whom she

was about to meet at the ball given in Alvar's honour, and between whom and herself lay the memory of something more than a flirtation.

The theory was, that the hero once found, the grand passion once experienced, was its own justification, itself the proof of depth of character and worth of heart. A girl who paused to consider her lover's character or her friends' disapproval, when she had once given her heart away, was a weak and cold-natured creature in her opinion. She knew that many difficulties lay between her and Rupert Lester, and she gloried in the thought of how they should be overcome, rejoiced in her own discrimination, which could see the difference between this real passion and the worldly motives of some of her other admirers, or the boyish fancy of Cheriton Lester, who talked to her about his brothers and his occupations, and had room in his heart, so it seemed to her, for a thousand lesser loves. Ruth believed that she despised flirtation; but there could be no

harm in being pleasant to a boy she had known all her life and whose attentions just now were so convenient. Besides, Cheriton was really very like his cousin Rupert, very like the photograph which she now hid away as Virginia came in search of her.

The two cousins had been a great deal together at intervals and were fond of each other, and Virginia knew something about Rupert; but Ruth knew better than to give her full confidence on the subject.

"Well," she said, as her cousin entered, "and how does the world go with you? Do you see much of the Lesters?"

"Yes; while the frost lasted I used to go down to the ice with the boys, and we met there. Cheriton comes over here sometimes, and once he brought his brother."

"What, the Spaniard? How *do* they manage? Is he very queer?"

"Oh, no! Of course he is very unlike the others. Cherry gets on very well with him. I believe Mr. Lester does not wish

the boys to come here much," added Virginia, abruptly.

"Well, it wasn't approved of in Roland's time," said Ruth.

"Were we always bad company?" said Virginia. "I have had a great deal to learn. Why did you never make me understand better what Elderthwaite was like?"

"But, Queenie," said Ruth cautiously, using a pet name of Virginia's girlhood, "surely you *were* told how tumbledown the place was, and how stupid and behindhand everything would be. Poor dear uncle James ought to have lived fifty years since."

"I don't believe that parish priests taught their people nothing but to catch rats fifty years since," said Virginia, with a touch of the family bitterness in her voice. "Is it because papa is poor that the men-servants get tipsy, and Dick and Harry are always after them? Oh, Ruth," suddenly softening, "I ought not to have said it, but the boys aren't brought up well; and if you *saw* how wretched the

people in the village are—and they look so wicked."

"Yes," said Ruth, as Virginia's tears silenced her, "but you know we Seytons *are* a bad lot. We're born, they say, with a drop of bad blood in us. Look at Aunt Julia, *she* was driven desperate and ran away—small blame to her—when her lover's father forbade the match; but they caught and stopped her. After that she never cared what she did, and just lived by making fun of things."

Virginia shuddered. Could her lazy, sarcastic aunt have ever known the thrillings and yearnings which were beating in her own heart now?

"There is not much fun in it," she said.

"No. As for Dick, I don't think much of him. Poor old Roland was worth a dozen of him. I don't care what people *do* as long as they *are* something. But Dick has no fine feelings."

"Ruth," said Virginia, "I think I was not taught better for nothing. I am sure papa is very unhappy; he thinks how

wrong everything is. Poor papa! Grandpapa was such a bad father for him. I cannot make friends with Dick, and Harry will go back to school. Indoors I have nothing to do; but I am going to ask Uncle James, and then if I go to the cottages and get the children together a little, perhaps it may be better than nothing. Old nurse says they all grow up bad. Poor things, how can they help it!"

"Well, Queenie," said Ruth dubiously, "I don't think the people are very fit for you to go to. I don't think Uncle Seyton would like it."

"I should not be afraid of them," said Virginia. "It would be doing something for papa, and doing good besides."

To think of her father as an involuntary victim to the faults of others was the one refuge of Virginia's heart; his graceful, melancholy gentleness had caught her fancy, and she was filled with a pity which, however strange from a child to a father, vibrated in every tender string of her nature. On the other hand, all her notions of right

were outraged by the more obvious evils prevailing at Elderthwaite, and she went through in those first weeks a variety of emotions, for which action seemed the only cure. She felt as if the sins of generations lay on her father's shoulders, and she wanted to pull them on to her own—wanted to stand in the deadly breach with the little weapon that her small experience had put into her hand. She wanted to teach a few poor children, a thing that might only be a pleasant occupation or the most commonplace of duties. But it was turning her face right round on the smooth slope the Seytons were treading, and trying to make a step up hill.

Ruth did not think that first step would be easy, and would have liked to see Virginia go downstairs in a somewhat less desperate humour, to find her uncle chatting to Miss Seyton in the drawing-room.

"Ha, ha, Miss Ruth! Come North just in time to make a conquest of the fine Frenchman at Oakby."

"I thought he was a Spaniard, uncle," said Ruth.

"Eh, pretty much of a muchness, aren't they? I've got a card for a grand ball to go and see him. Ha, ha! I'd sooner see him with a red coat on at Ashrigg meet next Thursday."

"But you must go to the ball, uncle, and dance with me," said Ruth.

"That's a bargain," said the jolly parson, striking his hands together. "Any dance I like?"

"To be sure."

"Ah, mind you look out, then. When you're sitting quiet with the Frenchman you'll see your old uncle round the corner."

"I never dance with any one who doesn't know the *trois temps*, uncle."

"Bless my soul! My favourite dance is the hornpipe, or old Sir Roger—kiss the girls as you pop under. That's an old parson's privilege, you know."

All this time Virginia had been standing apart, working up her courage, and now,

regardless of the unities of conversation, and with a now-or-never feeling, she began, her fresh young voice trembling and her colour rising high.

"Uncle James, if you please. I wanted to tell you I shall be very glad to do anything to help you, if you will allow me."

"Help me, my dear? Teach me the *troy tong*, or whatever Ruth calls it?"

"To help you in the parish, uncle."

"Parish? Ha, ha! Do they have the pretty girls to read prayers in the grand Ritualistic places nowadays?"

"I thought I might perhaps teach some of the children," faltered poor Virginia through her uncle's peal of laughter.

"Teach? We don't have many new-fangled notions here, my dear. Do your wool-work, and dance your *troy tong*, and mind your own business."

"I have always been accustomed to do something useful," said Virginia, gaining courage from indignation.

"Now look here, Virginia," said Parson

Seyton emphatically. "Don't you go putting your finger into a pie you know nothing of. There's not a cottage in the place fit for a young lady to set her foot in. There's a vast deal too much of young women's meddling in these days; and as for Elderthwaite, there's an old Methody, as they call him, who groans away to the soberer folks, and comforts their hearts in his own fashion. What could a chit of a lass like you do for them? Go and captivate the Frenchman with your round eyes—you've a grand pair of them—and give me a kiss."

Parson Seyton put out his hand and drew her towards him.

"But, uncle," she stammered, yielding to the kiss in such utter confusion of mind that she hardly knew what she was doing —"But, uncle, do you *like* that Methodist to—to attract the people?"

"Bless your heart, child, people must have their religion their own way. They'd stare to hear *me* convicting them of their sins. 'What's the parson done with

his own?' they'd ask. But it comforts them like blankets and broth, and it's little they get of either," with a side glance at his sister; "so I take good care to keep out of the way. I told Cherry Lester I should go and hear him some Sunday afternoon. 'Hope it would do you good, parson,' says he, coolly. Eh, he's a fine lad. What a confounded fool old Lester must think himself to have this foreign fellow ready to step into his place."

"Are you and Cheriton as great friends as ever, uncle?" asked Ruth.

"Friends! Oh, he's like Virginia here. Wants to teach me a lesson now and then. Got me over last year to their grand meeting of clergy and laity for educational purposes, and there I was up on the platform with the best of them."

"Did you make a speech, uncle?" asked Ruth.

"I did, my lass, I did! When they had quarrelled and disputed, and couldn't by any means agree, some one asked my opinion, and I said, 'My lord,'—Lord ——

was there, you know,—'and my reverend brethren, having no knowledge whatever of the subject, I have no opinion to give.' And old Thorold—he comes from the other side of the county, mind you,—remarked that 'Mr. Seyton's old-fashioned wisdom might find followers with advantage.' Ha—ha—you should have seen Cherry's blue eyes down below on the benches when I gave him a wink! 'Old-fashioned wisdom,' Miss Virginia; don't you despise it."

"Hallo, uncle! shouted Harry, putting his head in, "here's a fellow come tearing up to say the wedding's waited an hour, and if the parson isn't quick they'll do without him."

"Bless my soul, I forgot all about 'em; Coming—coming—and I'll give 'em a couple of rabbits for the wedding dinner. Virginia 'll never ask me to marry her, that's certain." And off strode the parson, while poor Virginia, scandalized and perplexed as she was, was fain, like every one else, to laugh at him.

CHAPTER X.

THE OLD PARSON.

"He gave not of that text a pulled hen
That saith that hunters ben not holy men."

PERHAPS no amount of angry opposition to her wishes could so have perplexed Virginia as her uncle's *nonchalance*, which, whether cynical or genial, seemed to remove him from the ranks of responsible beings, and to make him a law unto himself. When we read of young high-souled martyrs, we are apt to fancy that their way was plain before them; that however hard to their flesh, it was at least clear to their spirit; that Agnes or Cecilia, however much afflicted by the wickedness of their adversaries, were never perplexed by anything in them that was perhaps not

wicked. · Virginia Seyton was full of desires as pure, wishes as warm to lead the higher life, was capable of as much "enthusiasm of humanity" as any maiden who defied torture and death; but she was confronted by a kind of difficulty that made her feel like a naughty girl; the means to fulfil her purpose were open to so much objection that she could hardly hold firmly to the end in view. It may seem a very old difficulty, but it came upon her as a startling surprise that so much evil could be permitted by those who were not altogether devoid of good. For she was inclined to be sorry for this jolly, genial uncle, and not to wish to vex him; while yet his every practice and sentiment was such as she had been rightly taught to disapprove.

Anxious for a chance of settling her confused ideas, she slipped away by herself, and went out into the muddy lanes, heedless of a fast-falling shower.

The thaw had set in rapidly, and rich tints of brown, green, and yellow suc-

ceeded to the cold whiteness of the snow on moor and hill-side. A thaw, when the snow has fairly gone, even in the depth of winter, has a certain likeness to spring; the violent, buffeting wind was warm and soft, and the sky, instead of one pale sheet of blue, showed every variety of wild rain-cloud and driven mist.

Virginia plunged on through the mud with a perplexity in her soul as blinding as the tears that rose and confused the landscape already half-blotted out by wreaths of mountain mist. Suddenly, as she turned a corner, something bounced up against her, nearly knocking her down, and a voice exclaimed,—

"Down, Rolla! How dare you, sir! Oh, dear me, how sorry I am! that great brute has covered you with mud;" and Cheriton Lester, very muddy himself, and holding by the neck an object hardly recognizable as Buffer, appeared before her.

"I was very muddy before," said Virginia. "Why, what has happened to the puppy?"

"He fell into the ditch. Nettie will wash him; it's her favourite amusement. I was coming up here to ask after a young fellow I know, who works at this farm; he hasn't been going on very well lately."

"I suppose you know every one in Oakby," said Virginia, abruptly.

"Pretty well," answered Cherry. "I couldn't help doing so."

"I should like to know the people in Elderthwaite," said Virginia.

"It would be a very good thing for some of them if you did."

"Ah!" she said, suddenly, "but Uncle James will not let me do so."

"Ah!" said Cherry, with an inflection in his voice that Virginia did not understand. Then he added quickly, "What did you want to do?"

"I wanted," said Virginia, moved, she hardly knew why, to confidence as they walked on side by side, "to go to the cottages sometimes, and perhaps teach some of the children. Don't you think it would be right?"

"I think it would hardly do for you to go about at haphazard among the cottagers."

"But why? I am used to poor people," said Virginia.

Her sentences were short, because she was afraid of letting her voice tremble; but she looked at him earnestly, and how could he tell her that many of the people whom she wished to benefit owed her family grudges deep enough to make her unwelcome within their walls, how betray to her that the revelations they might make to her would affect her relations to her own family more than she could hope to affect their lives in return. But Cheriton was never deaf to other people's troubles, and he answered with great gentleness—

"Because we're a rough set up here in the North, and they would scarcely understand your kind motives. But the children —I wish you could get hold of them! I do wish something could be done for them. What did the old parson say to you?"

"He said he didn't approve of education."

"Oh, that's no matter at all! I declare

I think I see how you might do it, and we'll make the parson hunt up a class for you himself! What! you don't believe me? You will see. Could you go down to the vicarage on Sunday mornings?"

"Oh, yes! but Uncle James—"

"Oh, I'll make him come round. They might send over some benches from Oakby, and the children would do very well in the vicarage hall."

"But, Cheriton," exclaimed the astonished Virginia, "you can't *know* what my uncle said about it!"

"He said, 'Eh, they're a bad lot. No use meddling with them,' didn't he?" said Cheriton, in the very tone of the old parson.

"Something like it."

"Never mind. He would like to see them a better lot in his heart, as well as you or I would."

"Ruth says he is really very kind," said Virginia; "and I think he means to be."

"Ah, yes, your cousin knows all our odd ways, you know. She is with you?"

"Yes, she came yesterday."

"Ah! she knows that he *is* a very kind old boy. He loves every stone in Elderthwaite, and you would be surprised to find how fond some of the people are of him. Now I'll go and see him, and come and tell you what he says. May I?"

"To be sure," said Virginia, "and perhaps then Aunt Julia will not object."

"Oh, no, not to this plan," said Cherry.

He called Rolla, and went in search of the parson.

Cherry liked management; it was partly the inheritance of his father's desire for influence, and partly his tender and genial nature, which made him take so much interest in people as to enjoy having a finger in every pie. As he walked along, he contrived every detail of his plan.

Jack was wont to observe that Elderthwaite was a blot on the face of the earth, and a disgrace to any system, ecclesiastical or political, that rendered it possible. But then Jack was much devoted to his young house-master, and wrote essays for his

benefit, one of which was entitled, "On the Evils inherent in every existing Form of Government," so that he felt it consistent to be critical. Cheriton had a soft spot in his heart for a long existing form of anything.

He soon arrived at the vicarage, a picturesque old house, built half of stone and half of black and white plaster. It was large, with great overgrown stables and farm-buildings, all much out of repair. Cheriton found the parson sitting in the old oak dining-room before a blazing fire, smoking his pipe. Some remains of luncheon were on the table, and the parson was evidently enjoying a glass of something hot after it. Cheriton entered with little ceremony.

"How d'ye do, Parson?" he said.

"Ha, Cherry! how d'ye do, my lad? Sit down and have some lunch. What d'ye take? there's a glass of port in the sideboard."

"Thanks, I'd rather have a glass of beer and some Stilton," said Cherry, seating himself.

As he spoke, a little bit of an old woman came in with some cold pheasant and a jug of beer, which she placed before him. She was wrinkled up almost to nothing, but her steps were active enough, and she had lived with Parson Seyton all his life.

"Ay, Deborah knows your tastes. And what do you want of me?"

"I want to give you a lecture, Parson," said Cherry coolly.

"The deuce you do? Out with it, then."

"Virginia has been telling me that you will not let her teach the little kids on a Sunday."

"Bless my soul, Cheriton! d'ye think I'm going to let the girl run all over the place and hear tales of her father and brothers, and may be of myself into the bargain?"

"No," said Cherry; "but you ought to be very much obliged to her, Parson. It's a shame to see those little ruffians. Now you're going to call on half-a-dozen decentish people and tell them to send their children down here of a Sunday

morning at ten o'clock. Virginia will teach them in the hall. I'll get them to send over a couple of forms from Oakby. Don't let her begin with above a dozen, and don't have any big boys at first. Deborah might give them a bit of cake now and again to make the lessons go down. What do you say?"

"I say you're the coolest hand in Westmoreland, and enough to wile the flounders out of the frith!" said the old parson, as Cherry peeped at him over his shoulder to see the effect of his words.

"What are we coming to?"

"A model school, perhaps."

"And a model parson. Eh, Cherry, these enlightened days can't do with the old lot much longer."

"Oh, you're moving with the times," said Cherry, as he came and stood with his back to the fire, looking down at the parson as he filled his pipe, and smiling at him. Perhaps no other being in the world could have got Parson Seyton to consent to such an innovation, but he loved

Cheriton Lester, who little knew how much self-respect the allegiance of his high-principled promising youth was worth to the queer old sporting parson. One atom of pretence or of priggishness in a well-conducted correct young man would have been of all things odious to him, but the shrewd old man believed in Cheriton to the backbone, and of all the admiration and affection that the popular young man had won perhaps none did him so much credit as the love that made him a sort of good angel to rough Parson Seyton.

"You got my best dog out of me when I gave you Rolla," he said, "so I suppose you'll have your own way now."

"And it'll turn out quite as well as Rolla," said Cherry rather illogically.

Parson Seyton set about fulfilling his promise after a manner of his own.

He rapped with his dog-whip at a cottage door and thus addressed the mother:—

"Eh, Betty, there's a grand new start in Elderthwaite. Here's Miss Virginia

going to turn all the children into first-rate scholars.. Wash them up and send them over to my house on Sunday morning, and I'll give a penny to the cleanest, and a licking to any one that doesn't mind his manners."

If Parson Seyton had been a school-board visitor he could hardly have put the matter more plainly, and on the whole could hardly have adopted language more likely to be effectual.

CHAPTER XI.

ALVAR CONFIDENTIAL.

"He talked of daggers and of darts,
Of passions and of pains."

THE rain had ceased, and long pale rays of sunshine were streaming through the mist as Cheriton made his way through a very dilapidated turnstile and across a footpath much in need of drainage towards Elderthwaite House. As he came up through the overgrown shrubberries he saw in front of him a small fur-clothed figure, and his colour deepened and his heart beat faster as he recognized Ruth. He had been thinking that he should see her ever since his promise to Virginia, but he had not expected to meet her out-of-doors on so

wet a day, and he had hardly a word to say as he lifted his hat and came up to her. She was less discomposed, perhaps less astonished.

"Ah! how do you do?" she said. "Do you know when I saw some one coming I hoped it might be your new brother. I am *so* curious to see him."

"He is not a bit like any of us," said Cherry.

"No? That would be a change, for all you Lesters are so exactly alike."

Ruth had a way of saying saucy things in a soft serious voice, with grave eyes just ready to laugh. Cheriton and she had had many a passage of arms together, and now he rallied his forces and answerd,—

"Being new, of course he'll be charming. Rupert and Jack and I will know all our partners are longing for him. But as he can only dance with one young lady at a time, in the intervals I shall hope—I am much improved in my waltzing—just to get a turn."

"Really improved—at last?" said Ruth; then suddenly changing to sympathy—"But isn't it very strange for you all? How do you get on? How do *you* like him?"

"Oh, he isn't half a bad fellow, and we're excellent friends."

"That's very good of you. Now I have such a bad disposition that if I were in your place I should be half mad with jealousy."

Cheriton laughed incredulously.

"I daresay you would stroke us all down the right way. Rupert says he feels as if he were lighting his cigar in a powder-magazine. But they get on very well, and Grace and Mary Cheriton think him perfectly charming."

"I think I shall come to the ball in a mantilla. But have you done anything for poor Virginia?"

"Oh, yes; the old parson only wanted a little explanation," said Cherry, quite carelessly enough to encourage Ruth in adding earnestly,—

"It is *so* good of her to want to help these poor people. Queenie is like a girl in a book. I really think she likes disagreeable duties."

"I am sure you, who can sympathize with Virginia and yet know all the troubles, will be able to make it smooth for her. I wish you would."

"Ah, but I am not nearly so good as Virginia," said Ruth—a perfectly true statement, which she herself believed. Whether she expected Cheriton to believe it was a different matter.

Alvar had no excuse now for finding Oakby dull; the house was full of people, Lady Cheriton and her daughters were enchanted with his music, and he brightened up considerably and was off Cheriton's mind, so that nothing spoilt the radiance of enjoyment that transfigured all the commonplace gaiety into a fairy dream. The younger ones found the times less good. Jack was shy and bored by fine people, Bob hated his dress clothes, Nettie was teased by Rupert, who varied between

treating her as a Tomboy and flattering her as an incipient beauty, and thought her grandmother's restrictions to white muslin and blue ribbons hard. But Mrs. Lester had no notion of letting her forestall her career as a county beauty.

When Cheriton came back from Elderthwaite he found the whole party by the hall fire in the full tide of discussion and chatter, Nettie on the rug with Buffer in her arms complaining of the white muslin.

"Sha'n't I look horrid, Rupert?"

"Frightful; but as you'll be sure to bring Buffer into the ball-room he'd tear anything more magnificent."

"I sha'n't bring in Buffer! Rupert, what an idea! He'll be shut up, poor darling! But at least I may turn up my hair, and I shall. I'm quite tall enough."

"Turn your hair up? Don't you do anything of the sort, Nettie. Little girls are fashionable, and yellow manes and muslin frocks will carry the day against wreaths and silk dresses. You let your

hair alone, and then people will know it's all real by-and-by."

"Well, I'd much rather turn it up," said Nettie simply.

"Well, perhaps I would," said Rupert. "Fellows might say you let it down on purpose."

Rupert conveyed a great deal of admiration of the golden locks in his tone, but Nettie, though vain enough, was insensible to veiled flattery.

"Plait it up, Nettie," said Cherry briefly.

"If anybody thought I did such a nasty, mean, affected thing as that I'd never speak to him again. *Never!* I'd cut it all off sooner," cried Nettie.

"Young ladies' hair does come down sometimes," said Rupert; "when it's long enough."

"Mine *never* shall," said Nettie emphatically.

"Don't do it yourself, then," said Cherry.

"If Nettie ever takes to horrid, affected,

flirting ways," said Jack, who had joined the party, "I for one shall have nothing more to say to her."

"You don't admire flirts, Jack?" said Rupert.

"I don't approve of them," said Jack crossly.

"Oh, come, come, now, Jack, that's very severe."

"Poor Jack!" said Cherry; "he speaks from personal experience. There was that heartless girl last summer, who, after hours of serious conversation with him, went off to play croquet with Tom Hubbard, and gave him a moss-rose-bud. Poor Jack! it was a blow; he can't recover from it! It has affected all his views of life, you see."

"Poor fellow!" said Rupert, as Jack forcibly stopped Cherry's mouth; "I'd no notion it was a personal matter. Will she be at the ball?"

"No; you see, we avoided asking her."

"Cherry!" interposed the disgusted Jack, "how can you go on in this way! It's all his humbug, Rupert."

This serious denial produced, of course, shouts of laughter—in the midst of which Alvar entered and joined himself to the group round the fire as they waited for the arrival of some friends of Cheriton's.

"And what have you been about?" asked Cherry.

"I have been singing with your cousins. Ah, it is pleasant when there are those who like music!"

"You found all these fellows awful savages, didn't you?" said Rupert.

Alvar turned his great dark eyes on Cheriton with the same sort of expression with which Rolla was wont to watch him.

"Ah, no," he said; "my brother is not a savage. But I do like young ladies."

"But I thought," said Rupert, "that in Spain young ladies were always under a duenna, so that there was no chance of an afternoon over the piano?"

"But I assure you Miladi Cheriton was present," said Alvar seriously.

"Oh, that alters the question!" said

Rupert. "But come, now, we have been hearing Jack's views—let us have your confessions. Is the duenna *always* there, Alvar?"

"Here is my sister," said Alvar, with the oddest sort of simplicity, and yet with a tone that conveyed a sort of reproach to Rupert and—for the first time—of proprietorship in Nettie.

Rupert burst into a shout of laughter: "My dear fellow, what are you going to tell us?"

"She is a young girl; surely even here you do not say everything to her?" said Alvar, looking perplexed.

"By Jove, no!" said Rupert; "not exactly."

"Since Nettie is here, we should not have asked you to tell us anything we did not wish her to hear," said Cheriton, with a sense of annoyance that Alvar should be laughed at.

"*You* did not ask me," said Alvar quietly.

At this moment Bob called Nettie so

emphatically, that she was obliged unwillingly to go away.

"Now then, Alvar," said Rupert, "now for it. We won't be shocked. Tell us how you work the duennas."

"It would not have been well to explain that to Nettie," said Alvar seriously.

"Why not?" said Jack, suddenly boiling up. "Do you think *she* would ever cheat or want a duenna? English girls can always be trusted!"

"*Can* they?" said Rupert. "Shut up, Jack; you don't understand. We only want you to tell us how you do in Spain. *Affaires du cœur*—you know, Alvar."

Alvar looked round with an air half-shrewd, half-sentimental; while Cheriton listened a little seriously. He knew very little of Alvar's former life; perhaps because he had been too reticent to ask him questions; perhaps because Alvar found himself in the presence of a standard higher than he was accustomed to. Anyway, Nettie might have heard his present revelations.

"There was a time," he said, sighing, "when I did not intend to come to England—when I had sworn to be for ever a Spaniard. Ah, my cousin, if you had seen my Luisa, you would not have wondered. I sang under her window; I went to mass that I might gaze on her."

"Did you now? Foreign customs!" interposed Rupert; while Cherry laughed, though he felt they were hardly treating Alvar fairly.

"I knew not how to speak to her. She was never alone; and it was whispered that she was already betrothed. But one day she dropped her fan."

"No, no—surely?" said Cherry.

"I seized it, I kissed it, I held it to my heart," said Alvar, evidently enjoying the narration, "and I returned it. There were looks between us—then words. Ah, I lived in her smiles. We met, we exchanged vows, and I was happy!"

Rupert listened to this speech with amusement, which he could hardly stifle. It was inexpressibly ludicrous to Cheriton;

but the fun was lost in the wonder whether Alvar meant what he said. This was neither like the joking sentiment nor the pretended indifference of an Englishman's reference to such passages in his life; yet the memory evidently cost Alvar no pain. Jack sat, looking totally disgusted.

"At last," Alvar went on, "we were discovered. Ah, and then my grandfather was enraged, and her parents, they refused their consent, since she was betrothed already. I am an Englishman, and I do not weep when I am grieved, but my heart was a stone. I despaired."

"She must have been a horrid little flirt not to tell you she was engaged," said Jack.

"She did not know it till we had met," said Alvar.

"What awful tyranny!"

"Ah, and she was your only love!" sighed Rupert.

"No," said Alvar simply, "I have loved others; but she was the most beautiful. But I submitted, and now I forget her!"

"Hm—the truest wisdom," said Rupert.

Cherry was growing angry. He did not think that Rupert had any business to make fun of Alvar, and he was in a rage with Alvar for making himself ridiculous. That Alvar should tell a true love-tale with sentimental satisfaction to an admiring audience, or sigh over a flirtation which ought to have been a good joke, was equally distasteful to him. He burst out suddenly, with all his Lester bluntness, and in a tone which Alvar had hitherto heard only from Jack,—

"If you fellows are not all tired of talking such intolerable nonsense, I am. It's too bad of you, with a sharp look at Rupert. "I don't see that it's any affair of ours."

"You're not sympathetic," said Rupert, as he moved away; for he was quite familiar enough with his cousins for such giving and taking.

CHAPTER XII.

THE OAKBY BALL.

"She went to the ball, and she danced with the handsome prince."

THAT week of gaiety, so unusual to Oakby, was fraught with great results. The dim and beautiful dream of the future which had grown with Cheriton Lester's growth became a definite purpose. Ruth Seyton was his first love, almost his first fancy. Whatever other sentiments and flirtations had come across him, had been as light as air; he had loved Ruth ever since he had taught her to ride, and since she had tried to teach him to dance. He had always found her ready to talk to him of the thoughts and aspirations which found no

sympathy at home, and still more ready to tease him about them. She was part of the dear and sacred home affections, the long accustomed life which held so powerful a sway over him, and she was besides a wonderful and beautiful thing, peculiar to himself, and belonging to none of the others.

He had not seen her since the season when he had met her in town with Virginia; he did not know very much really about her, but she was kind and gracious to him, and he walked about in a dream of bliss which made every commonplace duty and gaiety delightful. Ruth was mixed up in it all, it was all in her honour; and though Cheriton's memory at this time was not to be depended on, he had spirits for any amount of the hard work of preparation, and a laugh for every disagreeable.

He regarded his tongue as tied till after he had taken his degree in the summer—he hoped with credit; after which his prospects at the bar with Judge Cheriton's

interest, were somewhat less obscure than those of most young men. He had inherited some small fortune from his mother, and though he could not consider himself a brilliant match for Miss Seyton, he would then feel himself justified in putting his claims forward. Many spoke with admiration of the entire absence of jealousy which made him take the second place so easily; but Cheriton hardly deserved the praise, he had no room in his mind to think of himself at all.

His cousin Rupert was a more recent acquaintance of Ruth's, though matters had gone much further between them. His attentions had not been encouraged by her grandmother, as, though his fortune was far superior to anything Cheriton possessed, his affairs were supposed to be considerably involved, and this was so far true, that it would have been very inconvenient to him to lay them open to inquiry at present. He hoped, however, in the course of a few months to be able so to arrange them, as to make it possible to

apply to Ruth Seyton's guardians for their consent.

Rupert was a lively, pleasant fellow, with a considerable regard for his Oakby cousins, though he had never considered it necessary to regulate his life by the Oakby standard, or concerned himself greatly with its main principles. His life in the army had of course been quite apart from Cheriton's at school and college, and the latter did not care to realize how far the elder cousin, once a model in his eyes, had grown away from him. Nor did he regard him as a rival.

Ruth gave smiles and dances to himself, and he little guessed that while he did his duty joyously in other directions, looking forward to his next word with her, she had given his cousin a distinct promise, and engaged to keep it secret till such time as he chose to ask for her openly. Perhaps Rupert could not be expected to scruple at such a step, when he knew how entirely Ruth had managed her affairs for herself in all her intercourse with him.

And as for Ruth she rejoiced in the chance of making a sacrifice to prove her love; and whether the sacrifice was of other people's feelings, her own ease and comfort, or of any little trifling scruples of conscience, ought, she considered, to be equally unimportant. "Love must still be lord of all," but the love that loves honour more was in her eyes weak and unworthy. Faults in the hero only proved the strength of his manhood; faults in herself were all condoned by her love.

Ruth was clever enough to put into words the inspiring principles of a great many books that she read, and a great deal of talk that she heard, and vehement enough to act up to it. Rupert, who had no desire to be at all unlike other people, had little notion of the glamour of enthusiasm with which Ruth plighted him her troth at Oakby.

The Lesters had expended much abuse on the morning of their ball on the blackness of the oak-panels, which no amount of wax candles would overcome

but what was lost in gaiety was gained in picturesqueness, and the Oakby ball, with its handsome hosts and its distinguished company, was long quoted as the prettiest in the neighbourhood. Perhaps it owed no little of its charm to the one in whose honour it was given. Alvar in society was neither silent nor languid; he was a splendid dancer, and played the host with a foreign grace that enchanted the ladies, old and young. At the dinner-party the night before he had been silent and stately, evidently fearing to commit himself before the country gentlemen and county grandees, who were such strange specimens of humanity to him; but with their daughters it was different, and those were happy maidens who danced with the stranger. He was of course duly instructed whom he was thus to honour, but he found time to exercise his own choice, and Virginia was conscious that he paid her marked attention.

Why waste more words? She had found her fate, and softened with home troubles,

attracted by the superiority of the Lesters, and dazzled with the charm of a manner and appearance never seen before, yet suiting all her girlish dreams of heroic perfection, she was giving her heart away to the last man whose previous training or present character was likely really to accord with her own.

Though she had never been an acknowledged beauty, she could often look beautiful, and the subtle excitement of half-conscious triumph was not wanting to complete the charm.

"There never had been such a pleasant ball," said Cheriton the next morning, as he was forced to hurry away to Oxford without a chance of discussing its delights.

"It is indeed possible to dance in England," said Alvar.

"I think we made it out very well," said Rupert, with a smile under his moustaches.

"There are balls—and balls," said Ruth to her cousin. "You don't always have

black oak, or black Spanish eyes, eh, Queenie? or some other things?"

And Virginia blushed and said nothing.

Nettie, after all, had rejoiced in the partners of which her white frock and plaited hair had not defrauded her (she never should forgive her hair for coming down in Rupert's very sight in the last waltz). Jack had not been so miserable as he expected; and Alvar found that it was possible to enjoy life in England, and that the position awaiting him there was not to be despised, even in the face of parting from his beloved Cheriton.

Rupert by no means considered Alvar as an amusing companion, nor Oakby in the dull season an amusing place, but it suited him now to spend his leave there, and suited him also to be intimate at Elderthwaite. Consequently he encouraged Alvar to make excuses for going there, and certainly in finding some interests to supply Cheriton's place. He cultivated Dick Seyton, who was of an age to appreciate a grown-up man's atten-

tions, so that altogether there was more intercourse between the two houses than had taken place since the days of Roland.

Ruth was paying a long visit at Elderthwaite. One of her aunts—her grandmother's youngest and favourite child—was in bad health, and Lady Charlton was glad to spend some time with her and to be free from the necessity of chaperoning her granddaughter. The arrangement suited Ruth exactly. She could make Elderthwaite her head-quarters, pay several visits among friends in the north, and find opportunities of meeting Rupert, whose regiment was stationed at York, and who was consequently within reach of many north country gaieties.

For the present no gaieties were needed by either to enliven the wintry woods of Elderthwaite; they were as fairy land to the little brown maiden who, among their bare stems and withered ferns found, as she believed, the very flower of life, and had no memory for the bewitching smiles, the soft, half-sentimental laughter, the

many dances, and the preference hardly disguised which were the food of Cheriton's memory, and gave him an object which lightened every uncongenial task. These little wiles had effectually prevented every one from guessing the real state of the case. Rupert's difficulty was that he never could be sure how far Alvar was unsuspicious. There was a certain blankness in his way of receiving remarks, calculated to prevent suspicion, which might proceed from entire innocence, or from secret observation which he did not choose to betray. But he was always willing to accompany Rupert to Elderthwaite, and in Cheriton's absence found Virginia by far his most congenial companion.

The amount of confidence already existing between Ruth and her cousin really rendered the latter unsuspicious, and ready to further intercourse with Rupert, believing Ruth to be in a doubtful state of mind, half encouraging, and half avoiding his attentions. And Ruth was very cautious; she never allowed Rupert to monopolize

her during his ostensible visits, and if any one at Elderthwaite guessed at their stolen interviews, it was certainly not Virginia.

The scheme of the Sunday class had answered pretty well. Virginia knew how to teach, and though her pupils were rough, the novelty of her grace and gentleness made some impression on them.

The parson did not interfere with her, and it never occurred to her that he was within hearing, till one Sunday, as she tried to tell them the simplest facts in language sufficiently plain to be understood, and sufficiently striking to be interesting, and felt, by the noise on the back benches, that she was entirely failing to do so, a head appeared at the dining-room door, and a stentorian voice exclaimed,—

"Bless my soul, you young ruffians; is this the way to behave to Miss Seyton? If any lad can't show respect to a lady in my house, out he'll go, and, by George he won't come in again."

This unwonted address produced an as-

tonished silence; but it frightened the teacher so much more than her class, that her only resource was to call on the more advanced ones with great solemnity "to say their hymn to the vicar."

Parson Seyton straightened himself up, and listened in silence to—

"There is a green hill far away,"

stumbled through in the broadest Westmoreland; and when it was over, remarked,—

"Very pretty verses. Lads and lasses, keep your feet still and attend to Miss Seyton, and—*mind*—I can hear ye," a piece of information with which Virginia at any rate could well have dispensed.

But she was getting used to her rough uncle, and was grateful to Cheriton for the advice that he had given her, and so she told Alvar one day when they were all walking down to the vicarage, with the ostensible purpose of showing Nettie some enormous mastiff puppies, the pride of the vicar's heart.

In the absence of her own brothers Nettie found Dick Seyton an amusing companion, "soft" though he might be; she began by daring him to jump over ditches as well as she could, and ended by finding that he roused in her unsuspected powers of repartee. Nettie found the Miss Ellesmeres dull companions; they were a great deal cleverer than she was, and expected her to read story books, and care about the people in them. Rupert and Dick found that her ignorance made her none the less amusing, and took care to tell her so.

So everything combined to make intercourse easy; and this was not the first walk that the six young people had taken together.

"Your brother," said Virginia to Alvar, "was very kind to me. I should never have got on so well but for his advice.

"My brother is always kind," said Alvar, his eyes lighting up. "I cannot tell you how well I love him."

"I am sure you do," said Virginia heartily, though unable to help smiling.

"But in what was it that he helped you?" asked Alvar.

Virginia explained how he had persuaded her uncle to agree to her wishes about teaching the children.

"To teach the ignorant?" said Alvar. "Ah, that is the work of a saint!"

"Oh, no! I like doing it. It is nothing but what many girls can do much better."

"Ah, this country is strange. In Spain the young ladies remain at home. They go nowhere but to mass. If my sister were in Spain she would not jump over the ditches, nor run after the dogs," glancing at Nettie, who was inciting Rolla to run for a piece of stick.

"Do you think us very shocking?" said Virginia demurely.

"Nay," said Alvar. "These are your customs, and I am happy since they permit me the honour of walking by your side, and talking with you. You, like my brother, are kind to the stranger."

"But you must leave off calling yourself

a stranger. You too *are* English; can you not feel yourself so?"

"Yes, I am an Englishman," said Alvar. "See, if I stay here, I have money and honour. My father speaks to me of a 'position in the county.' That is to be a great man as I understand it. Nor are there parties here to throw down one person, and then another. In Spain, though not less noble, we are poor, and all things change quickly, and I shall not stay always here in Oakby. I am going to London, and I see that I can make for myself a life that pleases me."

"Yet you love Spain best?"

"I love Spain," said Alvar, "the sunshine and the country; but I am no Spaniard. No, I stayed away from England because it was my belief that my father did not love me. I was wrong. I have a right to be here; it was my right to come here long ago, and my right I will not give up!"

He drew himself up with an indescribable

air of *hauteur* for a moment, then with sudden softness,—

"And who was it that saw that right and longed for me to come, who opened his heart to me? It was Cheriton, my brother. He has explained much to me, and says if I learn to love England it will make him happy. And I will love it for his sake."

"I hope so; soon you will not find it so dull."

"Nay, it is not now so dull. Have I not the happiness of your sympathy? Could I be dull to-day?" said Alvar, with his winning grace.

Virginia blushed, and her great eyes drooped, unready with a reply.

"And there is your cousin," she said, shyly; "he is a companion; don't you think him like Cheriton?"

"Yes, a little; but Cheriton is like an angel, though he will not have me say so; but Rupert, he has the devil in his face. But I like him—he is a nice fellow—very nice," said Alvar, the bit of Eng-

lish idiom sounding oddly in his foreign tones.

Virginia laughed, spite of herself.

"Ah, I make you laugh," said Alvar. "I wish I had attended more to my English lessons; but there was a time when it was not my intention to come to England, and I did not study. I am not like Cheriton and Jack, I do not love to study. It is very pleasant to smoke, and to do nothing; but I see it is not the custom here, and it is better, I think, to be like my brother."

"Some people are rather fond of smoking and doing nothing even in England."

"It is a different sort of doing nothing. I hear my father or Cheriton rebuke Bob for doing nothing; but then he is out of doors with some little animal in a bag—his ferret, I think it is called—to catch the rats; or he runs and gets hot; that is what he calls doing nothing."

There was a sort of *bonhommie* in Alvar's way of describing himself and his surround-

ings, and a charm in his manner which, added to a pair of eyes full of fire and expression, and a great deal of implied admiration for herself, produced no small effect on Virginia.

She saw that he was affectionate and ready to recognize the good in his brothers, and she knew that he had been deprived of his due share of home affection. She did not doubt that he was willing himself to do and to be all that he admired; and then—he was not boyish and blunt like his brothers, nor so full of mischief as Cheriton, nor with that indescribable want of something that made her wonder at Rupert's charm in the eyes of Ruth; she had never seen any one like him.

She glanced up in his face with eyes that all unconsciously expressed her thoughts, and as he turned to her with a smile they came up to the vicarage garden, at the gate of which stood Parson Seyton talking to Mr. Lester, who was on horseback beside him.

"Ha, squire," said the parson, "Mon-

sieur Alvar is a dangerous fellow among the lasses. Black eyes and foreign ways have made havoc with hearts all the world over."

Mr. Lester looked towards the approaching group. Virginia's delicate face, shy and eager under drooping feathers, and the tall, slender Alvar, wearing his now scrupulously English morning suit with a grace that gave it a picturesque appropriateness, were in front. Ruth and Rupert lingered a little, and Nettie came running up from behind, with Rolla after her, and Dick Seyton lazily calling on her to stop. Mr. Lester looked at his son, and a new idea struck him.

"I wish Alvar to make acquaintances," he said. "Nothing but English society can accustom him to his new life."

Here Alvar saw them, and raised his hat as he came up.

"Have you had a pleasant walk, Alvar?" said his father, less stiffly than usual.

"It has been altogether pleasant, sir,"

said Alvar, "since Miss Seyton has been my companion."

Virginia blushed, and went up to her uncle with a hasty question about the puppies that Nettie was to see, and no one exchanged a remark on the subject; but that night as they were smoking, Rupert rallied Alvar a little on the impression he was making.

Alvar did not misunderstand him; he looked at him straight.

"I had thought," he said, "that it was here the custom to talk with freedom to young ladies. I see it is your practice, my cousin."

"Yes, yes. Besides, I'm an old friend, you see. Of course it is the custom; but consequences sometimes result from it—pity if they didn't."

"But it may be," said Alvar, "that as my father's son, it is expected that I should marry if it should be agreeable to my father?"

"Possibly," said Rupert, unable to resist trying experiments. "Fellows with

expectations have to be careful, you know."

"I thank you," said Alvar. "But I do not mistake a lady who has been kind to me, or I should be a coxcomb. Good night, my cousin."

"Good night," said Rupert, feeling somewhat baffled, and a little angry; for, after all, he had been perfectly right.

CHAPTER XIII.

TWO SIDES OF A QUESTION.

"Love me and leave me not."

THE hill that lay between Oakby and Elderthwaite was partly covered by a thick plantation of larches, through which passed a narrow foot-path. In the summer, when the short turf under the trees was dry and sweet, when the blue sky peeped through the wide-spreading branches, and rare green ferns and blue harebells nestled in the low stone walls, the larch wood was a favourite resort; but in the winter, when the moorland winds were bleak and cold rather than fresh and free, when the fir-trees moaned and howled dismally instead of responding

like harps to the breezes, before, in that northern region, one "rosy plumelet tufted the larch," or one lamb was seen out on the fell side, it was a dreary spot enough.

All the more undisturbed had it been, and therefore all the more suitable for the secret meetings of Rupert and Ruth. Matters had not always run smooth between them. An unacknowledged tie needs faith and self-restraint if it is to sit easily; and at their very last parting Rupert expressed enough jealousy at the remembrance of Cheriton's attentions to make Ruth furious at the implied doubt of her faith, forgetting that *she* was miserable if he played with Nettie, or talked for ten minutes to Virginia.

Rupert insisted that "Cherry meant mischief." Ruth vehemently asserted "that it wasn't in him to mean;" and after something that came perilously near a quarrel, she broke into a flood of tears, and they parted with renewed protestations of inviolable constancy, and amid hopes of chance meetings in the course of the spring.

Ruth fled away through the copses to Elderthwaite feeling as if life would be utterly blank and dark till their next meeting; and Rupert strolled homeward, thinking much of Ruth, and not best pleased to meet his uncle coming back from one of his farms, and evidently inclined to be sociable; for Rupert, as compared with Alvar, had an agreeable familiarity.

Mr. Lester, though he had held as little personal intercourse with Alvar as the circumstances of the case permitted, had hardly ceased, since he came home, to think of his future, and that with a conscientious effort at justice and kindness. He still felt a personal distaste to Alvar, which ruffled his temper, and often made him less than civil to him; but none the less did he wish his eldest son's career to be creditable and fortunate, nor desire to see him adapt himself to the pursuits likely to be required of him. He made a few attempts to instruct him and interest him in the county politics, the requirements of

the estate, and the necessities of the parish; but Alvar, it must be confessed, was very provoking. He was always courteous, but he never exerted his mind to take in anything that was strange to him, and would say, with a shrug of his shoulders and a smile, "Ah, these are the things that I do not understand;" or, as he picked up the current expressions, "It is not in my line to interest myself for the people," with a *naïveté* that refused to recognize any duty one way or the other. In short, he was quite as impervious as his brothers to anything "out of his line," and, like Mr. Lester himself, thought that what he did not understand was immaterial.

Mr. Lester was in despair; but when he saw Alvar and Virginia together, and noticed their mutual attraction, it occurred to him that an English wife would be the one remedy for Alvar's shortcomings; and he also reflected, with some pride in his knowledge of foreign customs, that Alvar would probably require parental sanction before presuming to pay his addresses to any lady.

As for Virginia, though she was of Seyton blood, all her training had been away from her family; her fortune was not inconsiderable, and she herself, enthusiastic, refined, and high-minded, was exactly the type of woman in which Mr. Lester believed. Besides, since he could not make Alvar other than the heir of Oakby, his one wish was that his grandchildren at least should be English. He was very reluctant that Alvar should return to Spain, and at the same time hardly wished him to be a permanent inmate of Oakby. It had been arranged that Alvar should pay a short visit to the Cheritons before Easter, when he would see what London was like, go to see Cherry at Oxford, and having thus enlarged his experiences, would return to Oakby for Easter and the early part of the summer.

After Cheriton had taken his degree, he too would enjoy a taste of the season, and Alvar might go to town again if he liked; while in August Alvar must be introduced to the grouse, and might also see the fine

scenery of the Scotch and English lakes. These were plans in which Alvar could find nothing to complain of; but they would be greatly improved in his father's eyes if they could end in a suitable and happy marriage; for he saw that Alvar could not remain idle at Oakby for long, and had the firmest conviction that he would get into mischief, if he set up for himself in London. His mind, when he met Rupert, was full of the subject, and with a view to obtaining a side light or two if possible, he asked him casually what he thought of his cousin Alvar, and how they got on together.

"I don't think he is half a bad fellow," said Rupert, "a little stiff and foreign, of course, but a very good sort in my opinion."

This was well meant on Rupert's part, for he did not personally *like* Alvar, but he had tact enough to see the necessity of harmony, and family feeling enough to wish to produce it.

"Of course," said Mr. Lester, "you can

understand that I have been anxious about his coming here among the boys."

"I don't think he'll do them any harm, sir."

"No; and except Cherry, they don't take to him very warmly; but I hope we may see him settle into an Englishman in time. A good wife now—"

"Is a very good thing, uncle," said Rupert, with a conscious laugh.

"Yes, Rupert, in a year or two's time you'll be looking out for yourself."

Rupert liked his uncle, as he had always called him, and, for a moment, was half-inclined to confide in him; but he knew that Mr. Lester's good offices would be so exceedingly energetic, and would involve such thorough openness on his own part, that though his marriage to Ruth might possibly be expedited by them, he could not face the reproofs by which they would be accompanied.

So he laughed, and shook his head, saying, "Excellent advice for Alvar, sir; and see, there he comes."

Alvar approached his father with a bow; but was about to join Rupert, as he turned off by another path, when Mr. Lester detained him.

"I should like a word or two with you," he said, as they walked on. "I think—it appears to me that you are beginning to feel more at home with us than at first."

"Yes, sir, I know better how to suit myself to you."

"I am uncommonly glad of it. But what I meant to say was—you don't find yourself so dull as at first?" said Mr. Lester rather awkwardly.

"It is a little dull," said Alvar, "but I can well endure it."

This was not precisely the answer which Mr. Lester had expected; but after a pause, he went on,—

"It would be hard to blame you because you do not take kindly to interests and occupations that are so new to you. I do not feel, Alvar, that I have the same right to dictate your way of life as I should

have, if I had earlier assumed the charge of you; but I would remind you that since one day you must be master here, it will be for your own happiness to—to accustom yourself to the life required of you."

"My brother ought to be the squire," said Alvar.

"That is impossible. It is not a matter of choice; but it would cause me great unhappiness if I thought my successor would either be constantly absent or—or indifferent to the welfare of the people about him."

"You would wish me," said Alvar, "to live in England, and to marry an English lady."

"Why, yes—yes. Not of course that I would wish to put any restraint on your inclinations, or even to suggest any line of conduct; but it had occurred to me that —in short, that you find Elderthwaite attractive, and I wished to tell you that such a choice would have my entire approval."

Mr. Lester's florid face coloured with a sense of embarrassment; he was never at

his ease with his son, whereas Alvar only looked considerate, and said thoughtfully,—

"Miss Seyton is a charming young lady."

"Very much so, indeed," said the squire; "and a very good girl."

Alvar walked on in silence. Probably the idea was not strange to him; but his father could not trace the workings of his mind, and a sense of intense impatience possessed him with this strange creature whose interests he was bound to consult, but whose nature he could not fathom.

Suddenly Alvar stopped.

"My father, I have chosen. This is my country, and Miss Seyton—if she will —shall be my wife."

"Well, Alvar, I'm very glad to hear it," said his father, "very glad indeed, and I'm sure Cheriton will be delighted. Don't, however, act in a hurry; I'll leave you to think it over. I see James Wilson, and I want to speak to him."

And Mr. Lester called to one of the keepers who was coming across the park, while Alvar went on towards the house.

CHAPTER XIV.

VIRGINIA'S CHOICE.

"Things that I know not of, belike to thee are dear."

THERE was the shadow of such a thought on the blushing face of Virginia Seyton as she sat in a great chair in the old drawing-room at Elderthwaite and listened to the wooing of Alvar Lester. She held a bouquet on her lap, and he stood, bending forward, and addressing her in language that was checked by no embarrassment, and with a simplicity of purpose which had sought no disguise. Alvar had reflected on his father's hints over many a cigarette, he had thought to himself that he was resolved to be an Englishman, that Miss Seyton was charming and attractive beyond all

other ladies, it was well that he should marry, and he would be faithful, courteous, and kind.

Assuredly he was prepared to love her, she made England pleasant to him, and he had no strong ties to the turbulent life of Spain, from which his peculiar circumstances and his natural indolence had alike held him aloof. He had no thought of giving less than was Virginia's due, it was a simple matter to him enough, and he had come away that morning, with no false shame as to his intentions, with a flower in his coat and flowers in his hand, and had demanded Miss Seyton's permission to see her niece, heedless how far both households might guess at the matter in hand.

With his dark, manly grace, and tender accents, he was the picture of a lover, as she, with her creamy skin rose-tinted, and her fervent eyes cast down, seemed the very type of a maiden wooed, and by a favoured suitor. But if the hearts of this graceful and well-matched pair beat to the

same tune, the notes for each had very different force, and the experiences and the requirements of each had been, and must be, utterly unlike those of the other.

Alvar recognized this, in its obvious outer fact, when he began,—

"I have a great disadvantage," he said, "since I do not know how best to please an English lady when I pay her my addresses. Yet I am bold, for I come to-day to ask you to forget I am a stranger, and to help me to become truly an Englishman. Of all ladies, you are to me the most beautiful, the most beloved. Can you grant my wish—my prayer? Can I have the happiness to please you—Virginia?"

Virginia's heart beat so fast that she could not speak, the large eyes flashed up for a moment into his, then dropped as the tears dimmed them.

"Ah! do I make you shed tears?" cried Alvar. "How shall I tell you how I will be your slave? *Mi doña, mi reyna!* —nay, I must find English words to say

you are the queen of my life!" and he knelt on one knee beside her, and took her hand.

Perhaps it was all the more enchanting that it was unlike a modern English girl's ideal of a likely lover.

"Please don't do that," said Virginia, controlling her emotion with a great effort. "I want to say something, if you would sit down."

With ready tact Alvar rose at once, and drew a chair near her.

"It is my privilege to listen," he said.

"It is that I am afraid I must be very different from the girls whom you have known. My ways, my thoughts, you might not like them; you might wish me to be different from myself—or I might not understand you," she added very timidly.

"In asking a lady to be my wife, I think of no other woman," said Alvar. "In my eyes you are all that is charming."

"This would not have occurred to me," said Virginia; "but since I came home I have not been very happy, because it is so

hard to accommodate oneself to people who think of everything differently from oneself. If that was so with us—with you—"

"My thoughts shall be your thoughts," said Alvar. "You shall teach me to be what you wish—what my brother is. I know well," and he rose to his feet again and stood before her, "I am not clever, I do not know how to do those things the English admire; my face, my speech, is strange. Is that my fault; is it my fault that my father has hated and shunned his son? Miss Seyton, I can but offer you myself. If I displease you—"

Alvar paused. Virginia had been pleading against herself, and before his powerful attraction her misgivings melted away. She rose too, and came a step towards him.

"I will trust you," she said; and Alvar, more moved than he could himself have anticipated, poured forth a torrent of loving words and vows to be, and to do all she could wish. But he did not know, he

did not understand, what she asked of him, or what he promised.

"But we must be our *true* selves to each other," she said afterwards, as they stood together, when he had won her to tell him that his foreign face and tones were not displeasing to her—not at all. No, she did not wish that he was more like his brothers.

"I will be always your true lover and your slave," said Alvar, kissing the hand that she had laid on his. "And now must I not present myself to your father? He will not, I hope, think the foreigner too presuming."

"There is papa," said Virginia, glancing out of the window; "he is walking on the terrace. Look, you can go out by this glass door." And leaving Alvar to encounter this far from formidable interview, she ran away up to the little oak room in search of her cousin.

There were tears in Ruth's great velvety eyes as she turned to meet her, but she was smiling, too, and even while she held

out her arms to Virginia, she thought—"What, jealous of the smooth course of *her* little childish love! I would not give up one atom of what I feel for all the easy consent and prosperity in the world." But none the less was she interested and sympathetic as she listened to the outpourings of Virginia's first excitement, and to the recital of feelings that were like, and yet unlike, her own.

"You see, Ruthie, I could not help caring about him, he was so gentle and kind, and he never seemed angry with the others for misunderstanding him. But then I thought that our lives had been so wide apart that he *might* be quite different from what he seemed; and one has always heard, too, that foreigners pay compliments, and don't mean what they say."

"I should have despised you, Queenie, if you had thrown over the man you love because he was half a foreigner."

"Oh, no, not for *that*. But I didn't—I hadn't begun to—like him very much *then*,

you see, Ruth. And if he had not been good—'

"And how have you satisfied yourself that he is what you call 'good' now?" said Ruth curiously.

"Of course," replied Virginia, "it is not as if he had been brought up in England. He cannot have the same notions. But then he cannot talk enough of Cherry's goodness, and seemed so grateful because he was kind to him. Cherry *is* a very good, kind sort of fellow of course; but don't you think there is something beautiful in the humility that makes so much of a little kindness, and recognizes good qualities so ungrudgingly?"

Ruth laughed a little. Perhaps she thought Alvar's "bonny black eyes" had something to do with the force of these arguments.

"Since you love each other," she said, "that is a proof that you are intended for each other. What does it matter 'what he is like,' as you say?"

"But 'what he is like' made all the

difference in the first instance, I suppose?" said Virginia.

"Perhaps," said Ruth, with a little shrug. "But now you have once chosen, Virginia, *nothing* ought to make you change, not if he were ever so wicked—not if he were a murderer!"

"Ruth," exclaimed Virginia, "how can you be so absurd! A murderer!"

"A murderer, a gambler, or a—well, I'm not quite sure about a thief," said Ruth, cooling down a little; and then the girls both laughed, and Virginia sank into a dreamy silence. She did not even yet know the story of her mother's married life, or she could not have laughed at the thought of a gambler for her husband; but she did know enough of her family history to give definiteness to the natural desire of a high-principled girl to find perfection in her lover. Virginia's nature inclined to hero-worship; reverence was a necessary part to her of a happy love. She had thought often to herself that she would never marry a man of whose good principles she was not satisfied.

And since Alvar's offer had not entirely taken her by surprise—his gallantry having been tenderer than he knew—she had considered the point with an effort at impartiality, and had justified the conclusion to which her heart pointed by Alvar's admiration for the brother, whom, in Virginia's opinion, he idealized considerably. Of course, if she had chosen wisely, it was instinct, and not knowledge, that led her aright. She knew absolutely nothing of Alvar; and just as from insufficient grounds she now gave him credit for many virtues, it might be that, when the differing natures jarred, a little failure, a little defectiveness, might make her judgment cruelly hard, at whatever cost to her own happiness.

It might come to a struggle between the girl's ideal and the woman's love—and in such a struggle compromises and forgivenesses and new knowledge on either side would lead to final comprehension and peace. But it comes sometimes to a fight between heart and soul, between the higher self and the love that seems stronger than

self. To this extremity Alvar Lester was not likely to drive any woman; but impatience and inexperience sometimes mistake the one contest for the other. Virginia would have something to bear, he much to learn, before mutual criticism ceased, as they became indeed part of each other's existence, before Virginia's flutter of startled joy subsided into unquestioning content.

"You talk, Ruthie," exclaimed Virginia, after a little more confidential chatter, "but you cannot make up your own mind. You cannot decide whether you will have poor Captain Lester."

"Hark! hark!" cried Ruth, "they are calling you! Every one is not so lucky as you." And as Virginia obeyed her father's summons, and she was left alone, she pulled out the locket that contained Rupert's portrait, kissed it passionately, and exclaimed, half-aloud,—

"Not make up my mind! Do *I* doubt and hesitate? What do I care 'what you are like,' my darling? I love you with all

my heart and soul! I love you—I love you! What would life be without love?"

The congratulations of Virginia's family on the occasion were characteristic. Her father had but a nominal consent to give. Virginia was of age, and besides, the trustees of her fortune could not of course take any exception to such an engagement; but he rejoiced exceedingly, as at the first good and happy thing that had happened in his family for long enough.

"And so you have got a husband, though you are a Seyton?" said her aunt. "Well, Roland's a long way off, and I don't suppose Dick and Harry can create scandal enough to put an end to it before next October."

"But you'll give me a kiss, auntie?" said Virginia; and in the warmth of her embrace she tried to show the sympathy for that long past wrong which she never would have dared to utter.

Miss Seyton was silent for a moment, and patted her soft hair; then suddenly, with an expression indescribably *malin* and elfish, she said, "And all those poor little

neglected children, whose souls you were going to save, what will become of them when you are married? Do you think your uncle will teach them himself?"

"And I shouldn't be surprised if he did, Aunt Julia," interposed Ruth briskly, "now Virginia has shown him the way."

Parson Seyton's remark was somewhat to the same effect, though made in a more genial spirit.

"Well, my lass, so you've caught the Frenchman? Why didn't you set your cap at Cherry? He's worth a dozen of him."

"Cherry didn't set his cap at me, uncle," said Virginia, laughing.

"And all the little lads and lasses? Ha, ha, I must set about learning the catechism myself. What's to be done, my queen?—what's to be done? Send away Monsieur Alvar; we can't do without you."

Virginia had not forgotten the children; but as her marriage was not to take place till the late autumn, there was no immediate question of her leaving them.

Mr. Lester thought that it would be far better that Alvar should see something of England before his marriage, and Alvar acquiesced readily in his father's wish; and he very shortly left Oakby for London, after receiving congratulations from his brothers, in which astonishment was the prevailing ingredient, though Cheriton softened his surprise with many expressions of satisfaction.

He was glad that Alvar had chosen an English wife; still more glad that he had no disposition to choose Ruth.

CHAPTER XV.

A BIT OF THE BLARNEY.

"With him there rode his sone, a younge squire,
A lovyere and a lusty bachelere."

In that year Easter fell very late, and it was nearly the end of April before the Lesters gathered together once more at Oakby. Alvar and Virginia had hardly had time to grow accustomed to their new relations to each other before the former went to London, where he perhaps adapted himself more easily to his surroundings than he would have done in the presence of his father and brothers. He found that all English people did not regard life precisely from the Oakby point of view; that Lady Cheriton greatly regretted that Nettie was such a tomboy, and almost feared

that Bob would never be fit for polite society.

He was introduced to people who thought his music enchanting and his foreign manners charming; he was allowed to be on cousinly terms with the Miss Cheritons, and was an object of exciting interest to every young lady who met him. Under these circumstances he was very well content, and despatched graceful and tender letters to Virginia, which often had an amusing *naïveté* in their details of his impressions of English life. He also sent her various offerings, ornaments, sweetmeats, and flowers, always prettily chosen, and commended to her notice by some pleasant bit of tender flattery. His engagement was of course generally known, but his soft words and softer looks, though too universal to be delusive, were doubtless none the less attractive from the fact that his foreign breeding offered a constant cause and excuse for them.

Virginia, on her side, it need hardly be said, wrote him many letters, full of

thoughts, feelings, and hopes, and sometimes requests for his opinion on any subject that interested her. Alvar's replies were so charming, so flattering, and so tender, that she hardly found out that they were in no sense *answers* to her own.

He made a very great point of going to Oxford, and was full of excitement at the prospect of meeting "my brother" again. Cheriton, however, had lost some time by his idle Christmas vacation, and was forced to work very hard to make up for it. He had always too many interests in life to make it easy to concentrate all his efforts in one direction; but now the ambition and love of distinction that were a constant stimulus to the idle Lester nature in himself and Jack were fairly alight.

Cheriton cared for success in itself; he was too sweet-natured to *resent* failure, and conscientious enough to know that his love of triumph might be a snare to him, but each object in its turn seemed to him intensely desirable. He could not feel,

and even prevailing fashion made it difficult for him to affect, indifference. Besides, he wanted to appear in the light of a young man likely to succeed in life before Ruth's relations. So he wrote that he hoped Alvar would not think it unkind if he asked him to pay him only a short visit; and Alvar was half consoled by hearing the Judge speak in high terms of his nephew as a brilliant young man and likely to do them all credit.

"Ah," said Alvar, "I fear I should have done my name no credit if I, like my brother, had gone to Oxford."

"You are an eldest son, my dear fellow, and I don't doubt that you would have kept up the family traditions," said Judge Cheriton drily.

So Alvar went for one day to Oxford, where he showed an overpowering delight at seeing Cherry again, and a reprehensible preference for pouring out to him his various experiences, to inspecting chapels and halls. He greeted Buffer respectfully, nd taxed Cheriton with overworking him-

self. He looked pale, he said, and thin—not as he did at Oakby.

Cherry only laughed at him, but insisted emphatically that he should say no word at home of any such impression, as perhaps he should stay up and read during the Easter vacation.

"But what shall I do," said Alvar, "when the boys, who do not like me, come home, and you are not there?"

"You—why, you will be all day at Elderthwaite."

"I shall never forget my brother who was kind to me first," said Alvar earnestly.

Alvar finished up his London career by going to see the Boat Race, where he was exceedingly particular to appear in Oxford colours, and felt as if the triumph of the dark blue was Cherry's own.

Easter week brought unwontedly soft airs and blue skies to Oakby, and, after all, Cheriton himself for a few days' holiday. Every one rejoiced at the sight of him, though Jack promptly told him that he was very foolish to waste time by coming, and

when Cherry owned that he wanted a little rest, grudgingly admitted that he might be wise to take it; then seized upon him, first to discuss with him the work he himself was doing with a view to a scholarship for which he meant to compete at Midsummer; then demanded an immediate settlement, from Cherry's point of view, of several important and obscure philosophical questions; and finally confided to him a long history of Bob's scrapes and deficiencies during the past term.

He was so low in the school—he got in with such a bad lot—he ought to leave school and go to a tutor's. He, Jack, had told him he was going straight to the bad, but had done no good. Would Cherry give him a good blowing-up? Then Mr. Lester, having had a letter from the head-master, wanted to consult him on this very point, as well as to tell him all the story of Alvar's courtship and his own diplomatic behaviour. Also to regret that Alvar would not take the trouble to understand the details of English law as applied to

local matters ; could not see why Mr. Lester, as a magistrate, was prevented from transporting a poacher for life, or why, as an owner of land, he thought it necessary to be so particular as to the character of his tenants. Then an attempt at peacemaking with and for Bob, which resulted in little more than a persistent growl "that Jack was an awful duffer."

Altogether the family did not seem in a restful state. Mrs. Lester was very indignant because Mrs. Ellesmere had observed that Nettie was growing too tall a girl to go about so much by herself. "Who was there that did not know Nettie in all the country-side?" While Bob and Nettie themselves, who usually hung together in everything, especially when either was in trouble, had an inexplicable quarrel, which made neither of them pleasant company for their elders.

Then Mr. Lester's affairs came forward again in the shape of a dispute with one of his chief farmers about a certain gate which had been planted in the wrong place,

involving a question of boundaries and rights of way, and engaging Mr. Lester in a difference of opinion with a new neighbour, "a Radical fellow from Sheffield," whom Mr. Lester would neither have injured nor been intimate with for the world. Alvar had the misfortune to observe that "he thought it was not worth while to be so distressed about the post of a gate," an indifference even more provoking than the misplaced ardour of Jack, who had taken upon himself to examine the matter, and believing his father mistaken, thought it necessary to say so, which might have been passed over as a piece of youthful folly, if there had not been a frightful suspicion that Mr. Ellesmere was of the same opinion.

Cherry had heard enough of the "post of a gate" by the time he had read half-a-dozen letters of polite indignation, and listened to an hour's explanation from his father of the grounds of the dispute, after which he was requested to form an independent opinion on the subject.

"Well, father," he said, looking askance at a plan of the scene of action which Mr. Lester had drawn for his benefit, "it seems that the removal of this gate has mixed up Ashrigg, Oakby, and Elderthwaite to such a degree that we sha'n't know who is living in which. Of course Alvar *can't* see any boundaries between Oakby and Elderthwaite just now. How should he? His imagination leaps over them at once. But I *don't* think it will 'precipitate the downfall of the landed gentry,' Jack, whichever way it is settled." And having thus succeeded in making his father and Alvar laugh, and Jack remark "that he never could see the use of making a joke of everything," he asked Mr. Lester to come and show him the fatal spot. Couldn't they ride over and look at it?

"And I have never seen you yet," said Alvar reproachfully, when Mr. Lester had acceded to this arrangement.

"But you are going to Elderthwaite? I will come and meet you there. And, look here, the weather is so fine I am sure

we might all join forces and make an excursion somewhere. Wouldn't that be blissful?"

"Ah, you make sport of me!" said Alvar; but he promised to propose the plan at Elderthwaite.

So Cheriton and his father rode through the bright spring lanes together, like Chaucer's knight and squire, with the larks singing in the furrows, and the blue sky overhead, the sunshine full of promise and joy, even in the wild, bleak country, whose time of perfection never came till the purple heather clothed the bare moorlands and the summer months had had time to chase away all thought of the long, dreary winter. Every breath of the air of the hill-side was like new life to Cherry.

"It is so delightful to be at home," he said; "it's impossible to be very angry about 'the post of a gate.'"

Perhaps this happy humour contributed no small share towards the harmonious ending of the scene which Cherry described quaintly enough when he presented

himself at Elderthwaite in the afternoon. How on arriving at the scene of action they had found Farmer Fleming and the fellow from Sheffield both engaged in discussing the point; how Mr. Wilson had expressed *his* readiness to put up two gates if that would settle the matter, but he could not be dictated to on his own land; how Mr. Fleming's view of the matter seemed to consist in a constant statement of the fact that he had been the squire's tenant all his life, and his father before him; how the squire had remarked that Mr. Fleming's father, he was sure, would have known well that those four feet of land were common land, and half in Oakby and half in Ashrigg parish, Elderthwaite bordering them on the south, and that he, as Lord of the Manor, could not allow them to be enclosed; Mr. Wilson had purchased certain manorial rights in Ashrigg parish; they certainly extended over the two feet on his own side of the lane.

Then Cherry had remembered Mr.

Wilson's son at Oxford, and knew that last year he had taken a first. He had met him at breakfast; was he coming down soon? This had created a diversion; and while the squire and his tenant were at it hammer and tongs, Cherry had received several invitations, had warmly applauded Mr. Wilson's remark that he did not wish to be unpleasant to old inhabitants on first coming into the county, and the squire, having got his own way with the farmer, an amicable arrangement was arrived at; while Cherry went to see Mrs. Fleming's dairy, "because he remembered how she used to give him such beautiful new milk."

"Oh, Cherry, you have more than a bit of the blarney," said Ruth. "Haven't you a drop of Irish blood somewhere?"

"No more than Jack," said Cherry, who was perhaps a little pleased at his diplomacy. "I like to smooth things down, unless, to be sure, one is angry oneself."

"You are always the peacemaker," said Alvar.

"Ah, not always, I am afraid! But now

I want all the blarney I can muster to persuade you that it is warm enough to go and spend the day at Black Tarn. We might go by train from Hazelby to Blackrigg; have lunch at the inn there, and go up to Black Tarn by the Otter's Glen. I asked Mr. and Mrs. Ellesmere, and they will come with us"—to Virginia—"I assure you Alvar agrees."

"You are wasting your blarney," said Virginia smiling, "for we had agreed to go before you came. It will be very cold up at Black Tarn, but that will not signify if we take plenty of wraps."

Such a genuine piece of natural and innocent amusement was quite a novelty at Elderthwaite, and the boys were delighted. The party agreed to meet at Hazelby station, and go by train some ten or twelve miles towards the mountains on the outskirts of which Black Tarn lay. There was a train in the evening by which they could return, and no one left at home was to be anxious about them until they saw them coming back.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OTTER'S GLEN.

"An empty sky, a world of heather,
Purple of foxglove, yellow of broom,
We two among them, wading together,
Stepping out honey, treading perfume."

THERE was hardly a lonelier spot in all the country round than the little Black Tarn. The hill in which it lay possessed neither the rocky grandeur nor the fertile beauty of the neighbouring mountains; it was covered with grass and bog, not a tree relieved its desolateness, no grey rocks pushed their picturesque heads through the soil and gave variety to its shape. The approach to the little lake was defended by great beds of reeds and rushes, its waters were shallow, and later in the year

full of weeds and water-lilies. But there was a fine view of the heathery backs of some of the more important mountains, and the stream that rushed down the Otter's Glen was broad and clear, and had been the scene of many an exciting chase in grey misty mornings.

To-day the sun was bright and strong, the fresh mountain wind intensely exhilarating, and the whole party were in the highest spirits and ready to enjoy every incident of their excursion. They had had their lunch, as proposed, at the little wayside inn, where the Lesters were well known and always welcome, and had then set off on their three-miles walk to the tarn in scattered groups, all at their own pace and with different views of the distances they meant to effect.

A large division, headed by Mr. Ellesmere, had started off at a brisk pace, intending to get to the top of the hill and see half over the country, but stragglers began to drop behind.

Mrs. Ellesmere thought the tarn would

be enough for herself and her younger children; every one dropped off from Alvar and Virginia, and left them to their own devices, while Cherry set himself to persuade Ruth that the best thing to do was to follow the stream, step by step, along its winding course, heedless of the end.

He could hardly believe in his own good luck as the voices of the others died away in the distance, and Ruth put her hand into his to be helped along the slippery stepping-stones planted here and there on the marshy path-way.

Whatever was missing for Ruth in the perfection of the day's pleasure, her great dark eyes were bright and soft, and a little flush on her brown cheeks gave her an additional beauty. She wore a small closely-fitting hat with a red plume in it, and a tight dark dress; and thus, with her hand in his, and her bewitching eyes raised to his face, her image recurred to him in after days.

He had been laughing, and talking, and managing the expedition, but now alone

with her he fell silent, and there was that in his face as he looked down at her that frightened Ruth a little.

During these past months he had grown less "boyish," and it crossed Ruth's mind to wonder if he had had any special purpose in getting her to himself.

"And have you been working very hard?" she said, smiling at him.

"Pretty well," answered Cherry. "I shall be glad when it's all over."

"Won't they ring all the bells at Oakby?"

Cherry laughed.

"I hope they won't have occasion to toll them," he said; "it seems sometimes much more likely."

"Ah! that is because you get out of spirits. And after all, who cares except a lot of stupid old tutors?"

"I don't suppose you—any one, would care much."

"Why," said Ruth dexterously; "who judges a man by the result of an examination? that would be very unfair."

"Then," said Cherry shyly, "if I come to grief I shall go to you for—for consolation. You won't despise me?"

"Oh, Cherry! I am sure when one knows life one sees that after all those tests are rather childish. *I* should not think less of you if you made a mistake."

Perhaps it was characteristic of Cheriton that he felt more than ever resolved to attain success, and he answered,—

"You ought to think less of me if I did not do my best to avoid mistakes."

"Now that is worthy of Jack, of whom I am becoming quite afraid. I care for my friends because—well, because I care for them, and what they do makes no difference."

"That," said Cherry, "is the sort of backing up that would make a man able to endure failure till success came. But still one must wish to bring home the spoils!"

There was a dangerous intensity in Cheriton's accent, and Ruth laughed gaily.

"Of course, men are always so ambitious. Well, I believe in your spoils,

Cherry, but don't work *too* hard for them. Don Alvar told Virginia you would knock yourself up."

"Oh, Alvar! Hard work is a great puzzle to him. No fear of my working too hard, I get stupefied too quickly, otherwise I should not be here now; but I can't grudge what is so—so delightful. Take care, that is a very slippery stone. Won't you give me your hand? There, that's a safe one."

Ruth was not a great adept at scrambling independently, but she knew how to be helped with wonderful grace and gratitude. Nor was a solitary ramble with Cheriton at all an unnatural thing. He had helped her up in many a difficult place in their boy-and-girl days, and teased her by pretending that he would not help her down; but now she felt that in more senses than one she was treading on slippery ground, and guided the conversation on to the safer topic of Alvar and Virginia.

"Weren't you very much surprised," said Cheriton, "when that came about?"

"Well, you know," said Ruth, "Virginia is rather transparent. I couldn't help guessing that she was interested in your brother. She is so romantic, too, and he is such a cavalier."

"I suppose *you* always study common sense," said Cherry, who preferred greatly to talk about Ruth herself than to discuss Virginia.

"I have my own ideas of romance," said Ruth; "but I think I have out-grown the notion that every one ought to look like a hero."

"And what is your idea of romance?" asked Cherry, gratified by this remark.

"Self-devotion," said Ruth briefly, giving up everything for the one object. "That's true romance."

"Self-sacrifice?" said Cherry. "That is too hard work to be romantic about."

"Not for any one—anything one loved," said Ruth very low, but with flushing cheeks.

"Then," said Cheriton, "there would be no other self left to sacrifice."

Ruth was startled. Rupert had never so answered her thoughts, had never given her quite such a look.

Cherry paused and turned round towards her with a desperate impulse urging him to speak, her face shining with enthusiasm giving him sudden courage.

"Ah!" exclaimed Ruth, springing across on to a very unsteady stone, "you are getting too serious! I declare, there's a white butterfly, the first for the year. And look—oh, look, Cherry, isn't that bit of gorse pretty against the sky? It's too bad to discuss abstract questions at a picnic on a spring day."

Cheriton stood still for a moment. He heard the rush of the water, he saw the shine of the sun, his eyes followed the butterfly as it fluttered up to the bit of yellow gorse, he could see Ruth smiling and graceful, beckoning to him to follow her; the glamour and dazzle had passed, and the day was like any other fine day now.

"I did not mean to discuss *abstract* questions," he said, with a touch of offence.

"Ah! but you were getting very deep! Come, don't be cross, Cherry; you look exactly like Jack at this minute, and *you* can't make your eyebrows meet, so don't try."

"Poor Jack, you are very hard on him," said Cherry, recovering himself. "Will you have a bit of the gorse for your hat, if I cut all the prickles off?"

"If you cut all the prickles off, what will you leave?" said Ruth.

They had a very charming walk after this, and were much more merry and talkative than at first. There was a sense of being baffled deep down in Cherry's heart, but if the rest was surface work it was very enchanting, and they dawdled and chattered till the time slipped away, and they saw their party in the distance coming back from the tarn.

"Oh, let us run," said Ruth, "and get into the road before them."

"Come," said Cherry, holding out his hand, and they ran across the short turf, the sweet, keen air blowing in their faces,

a sort of excitement urging Ruth, who was a lazy little thing usually, to this childish proceeding.

They came running down into the road just as the whole party came back from the tarn, crying out on them for their laziness.

"We have been looking for you," said Virginia, whose hat was daintily wreathed with stag moss. "Alvar and I tried to find you."

"Oh, yes, you were miserable without us of course," said Cherry. "Hallo, Rupert! where on earth did you spring from?"

"I came over for a ball at the Molyneuxes; they have taken Blackrigg Hall, you know. I must get back by the first thing to-morrow. I heard of your picnic from some of the people about, and came to see if I could fall in with you."

"You are just in time to come back with us to the inn," said Mr. Ellesmere; "we shall have no more than time to get a cup of tea and be off for the train."

"I thought you would not come," whispered Ruth to Rupert as they all walked back together.

"So it seemed; what were you doing with Cherry?" said Rupert sharply.

Ruth looked at him with reproach in her eyes, but they had no chance then of obtaining private words. Rupert looked savage, but directed his efforts to sitting next her in the omnibus which was to convey most of the party to the station.

"Don't spoil these few minutes," whispered Ruth imploringly as she looked up in his displeased face. "Could I let people guess how I was longing for you? I thought you would have been here sooner."

"Cherry is always to the fore," said Rupert with an amount of ill-temper for which Ruth could not quite account. She felt profoundly miserable, so wretched that she could hardly keep the tears out of her eyes. She had looked forward for the last day or two to this poor little meeting as such a light in the darkness, and now

some one spoke to Rupert and some one else to herself. There was no chance of making it up—if they were to part so! Oh, it was hard! Virginia could say as much as she liked to *her* lover. Then Ruth saw that Alvar was not in the omnibus, nor Cheriton either, and hoped that the latter fact might assuage Rupert's jealousy. Perhaps he felt ashamed of it, for as they neared Blackrigg she felt his hand clasp hers, and he whispered, "Forgive me."

In the meanwhile Cheriton, having lingered a moment to make payments and final arrangements, was left for the "trap," a very nondescript vehicle, which had brought Bob and Jack from the station. To his surprise he found that Alvar instead of one of the younger ones was his companion.

"Why, how's this?" he said.

"I thought that I would wait for you. Is it not my turn?" said Alvar, who sometimes liked to claim an equality with the others.

"I'm afraid you'll get wet," said Cherry;

"they've all the plaids, and it is going to rain. These mountain showers come up so quickly."

"I do not mind the rain," said Alvar.

Cheriton, however, mindful of Alvar's short experience of the cold, driving rain of the country, made him put a dilapidated rug that was in the carriage over his shoulders, and drove on as fast as he could, through mist and wind, till about half-way to Blackrigg there was a great jolt,—off came the wheel of the trap, which turned over, and they were both thrown out on to the high bank beside the road.

Cherry felt Alvar's arm round him before he had time to get up, and heard him speaking fast in Spanish, and then, "You are not hurt, my brother?"

"Oh, no—no. Nor you? That's all right; but we're in a nice fix. No getting to Blackrigg to-night. Here's the wheel off."

The bank was soft and muddy; and they were quite unhurt, and after a minute, Cherry hailed a man passing by, and

asked him to take the horse back to the inn, proposing to Alvar to try to catch the train at Stonybeach, an intermediate station, to which he knew a short cut.

"Can you make a run for it?" he said.

"Yes—oh, yes, I can run," said Alvar. "This is an adventure."

It was such a run across country as reminded Cheriton of his days of paper-chases, and was probably a new experience to Alvar, who remarked breathlessly, as they neared the station,—

"I can run—when it is necessary; but I do not understand your races for amusement."

Cheriton made no answer, as they entered the station and found that after all a neighbouring market had delayed the train, and that they had still some minutes to wait.

"That's too bad," said Cherry, as strength and breath fairly failed him, and he sat hastily down on a bench, to his own surprise and annoyance, completely exhausted.

"Ah! you are too tired!" exclaimed Alvar, coming to him; and with a kindness and presence of mind for which few had given him credit, he made Cherry rest, and got the porter to fetch some water for him (the little roadside station afforded nothing else), till after a few minutes of dizzy faintness and breathlessness, Cherry began to revive into a state of indignation with himself, and gratitude to his brother, the expression of which sentiments Alvar silenced.

"Hush! I will not have you talk yet! You must rest till the train comes. Lean back against me. No—you have not made a confounded fool of yourself, when you could not help it."

"I suppose the fall shook me," said Cherry, presently. "Hark! there is the train. Now, Alvar, don't you say a word of this. I am all right now."

He stood up as the train came creeping and groaning into the station, and Jack made signs to them out of the window. The train was crowded, and the rest of the

party were farther back. Jack exclaimed at their appearance, and while they were explaining their adventure, Alvar got some wine for Cheriton out of a hamper that had been brought for the luncheon.

"Why, Alvar, you are more than half a doctor," said Cherry, as he took it. "I'm all right again now."

Jack scanned him a little anxiously. "You had no business to be knocked up," he said briefly. "You should not have tried to run when you were so out of condition."

"If I am a doctor, Jack," said Alvar, "I will not have my patient scolded. He is better now, are you not, *Cherito mio?* And we are not fit to see the ladies. See, I am covered with mud," and Alvar endeavoured to brush the mud off his hat, and to make his wet clothes look a little less disreputable.

Cherry put a great coat on, as a measure both of prudence and respectability. He had been desperately desirous of catching the train for the sake of a few more

words with Ruth; for on the next day he was obliged to return to Oxford. They were all to part at Hazelby, where their respective carriages awaited them.

Ruth had forgotten his very existence as he hurried up to her in the crowded station; for Rupert had been forced to go on by the train. She remembered now that her walk with him had made Rupert angry, and hardly able to control her voice to speak at all, she wished him a cold, hasty good-night, and sprang into the carriage without giving him time for a word.

Cheriton was both angry and miserable; he stood back silently, while Alvar put Virginia into the carriage, and excused himself gaily for his muddy coat. Dick Seyton ran up at the last minute, and the Lesters set out on their six-miles drive in an open break, under waterproofs and umbrellas, through the pouring rain. The twins disputed under their breath, and Jack lectured Cheriton on the amount of exercise necessary during a period of hard reading.

Cherry, for once, answered him sharply, and Alvar, as was usually the case when his *Geschwistern* quarrelled, wondered silently, both how they could be so uncourteous to each other, and how they could excite themselves so much about nothing. But there had been something in the manner of his kindness and attention that dwelt pleasantly in Cheriton's memory of a day which for many reasons he had afterwards cause to look back upon with pain.

CHAPTER XVII.

RIFTS.

"It is the little rift within the lover's lute."

In the June following the expedition to Black Tarn, some great festivities were held in honour of the coming of age of a young nobleman, who possessed a large property about fifteen miles from Oakby.

His father, the late Lord Milford, had been a friend of Mr. Lester, and the young man himself was at school for a time with his sons. The event being also of importance in the county, old Mrs. Lester broke through her usual home-staying habits, and took Ruth and Virginia Seyton for a three days' visit to Milford Hall.

It was right for Virginia to be seen in her own county before her marriage; it

was years since her father and aunt had been present at such a gathering, and Alvar and his father were of course among the guests. Cheriton was passing, or had passed, his examination; but he had decided not to come home until he knew his fate; and in studying the papers every morning, in the hope of seeing the Class Lists long before they could possibly be printed, Mr. Lester and Alvar found at last a subject on which they could thoroughly sympathize, though Mr. Lester frequently remarked that there was never any knowing how those matters would be managed; he did not expect much, while Alvar suffered from no misgivings at all.

Rupert and some of his brother officers were among the guests; the entertainments were of the most brilliant description, and the weather perfect.

Ruth was well known and popular. True, she distinguished herself neither in archery nor any other outdoor sport; she was not even a very great dancer; but she could talk, and look, and smile as if her

companion's words were the one thing interesting to her; hence her success. And Rupert was there, and in the dark alleys and lonely shrubberies of the great gardens at Milford, opportunities for *tête-à-têtes* were not wanting. Ruth, conscious of her becoming dress of the soft, warm maize that suited her brown skin, with amusement and admiration to froth her cup of pleasure, and Rupert's exciting presence to spice it and make it worth the drinking, might seem to be enjoying the most brilliant outcome of young-lady life. Sparkle and colour, feeling and passion, she would have chosen as her greatest good. Theoretically she would have willingly embraced the pains and penalties which they might bring in their train. Yet Ruth on the sunny lawns and stately paths of Milford was profoundly and violently miserable, full of anger and despair.

The terms on which she stood with Rupert were such as could only be endurable with the most perfect trust on

both sides. Where it was necessary to feign neglect, it was sometimes a strain to believe in the real devotion. Neither Ruth nor Rupert were people whose manners precluded the possibility of a mistake, and, as has been seen, Rupert was not proof against jealousy. The strength of Ruth's own passion made her more trustful of his, but at the same time she demanded more from him, and he failed to fulfil her ideal of an ardent lover. He appeared to her to be too cautious, to miss opportunities, and be his necessity for secrecy what it might, she *could* not bear to see him attentive to others—to another, rather.

There was a young Lady Alice, in her first season, a charming childish beauty, after whom it was the fashion to run, and who found it agreeable enough to torment her many admirers, and provoke the aunt who chaperoned her, by flirting with the handsome Captain Lester, who, on his side, knew well enough that she meant nothing serious; and, while he was true in his

heart to Ruth, was vain enough to be flattered by the preference of a beauty, and of a lady, moreover, of rank and distinction. It showed every one that he was a man of the world, and a very agreeable fellow.

Perhaps matters might have mended if Mrs. Lester, who thought modern manners much too free, and drew a sharp distinction between the simplicity of her own straightforward, unwatched girlhood and the coquetries of a ball-room, and who, moreover, disapproved of Ruth, had not looked so very sharply after her, that private interviews were rendered difficult, and Ruth was growing too angry to seek one.

She had not sat by him at dinner; they were separated at the great concert that had been given on the day of their arrival; and on the next, which was one long *fête*, ending in a ball, they only caught a few hasty words with each other; and it appeared to her excited fancy that he was for ever at Lady Alice's side. In the evening she would not dance with him, crowding

her card with names, laughed, talked, flirted, and was wretched. It was not till after supper that he pursued her into the last of a long vista of conservatories, where a very youthful partner had conducted her to smell the stephanotis, and claim the next dance as his own.

The warm, scented air, the distant music, the soft, dim mingling of lamp and moonlight, through which strange, rare flowers gleamed out from their dark foliage, formed such a background as Ruth's vivid fancy, fed by many a tale and poem, had often painted, to scenes that should satisfy her in their tenderness and intensity. Among the wild fir-woods of Oakby, here and there, at odd times and by unexpected chances, she had known blissful moments, every one of which was before her now as she set her mouth hard, and looked at Rupert with eyes full both of love and anger.

Rupert was excited and eager, conscious of having given cause of offence, and a little off his head with the flattery he had

received. He failed to read the meaning of her face, and turned to her eagerly.

"At last, my child! Mrs. Lester is a perfect dragon!"

"I don't think it has been Mrs. Lester's fault."

"It has been none of mine," said Rupert. "Your fine, yellow dress escaped me at every turn, and I could not get away from the people. I have had to work hard for my fun, and arrange dozens of things."

"I daresay it is very pleasant to be so popular," said Ruth, detecting the little boast, which in a cooler moment would have passed unnoticed. There was a sort of airiness in Rupert's manner, inexpressibly irritating when she wanted every assurance of the passion which she was so often obliged to take upon trust.

"Come, Ruthie, that's not fair. What is a poor fellow to do? I have been horribly down in the mouth since we parted; it takes so long to get one's affairs to rights. Your guardians would bow me out of the house pretty quickly if I applied

to them now. Can you trust me a little longer, my darling? I'm living on twopence a day to bring things round."

"And did the gloves Lady Alice won from you, come out of the twopence?" said Ruth, unable to control her anger, sarcastic because such a storm of tears was pending.

Rupert's quick temper took fire in a moment.

"If you have so little confidence in me, Ruth, as to be angry at such a trifle," he said hotly, "it is impossible— You make me feel that I ask more of you than you can give."

"Yes," said Ruth, "I cannot give such confidence. When it is months since I have seen you—weeks since I heard from you. I *cannot* see you devoted to—to another, when you cannot find a moment for me. If *you* can bear it—"

"You are very unreasonable, Ruth. I thought that you were generous before all other women, and patient. You speak as if you doubted my honour."

"If it comes to talking of *honour*," cried

Ruth, "if you need *that* to bind you, you are free. I will not hold you one hour by your honour!"

"Nor I you to a trial of generosity, which it seems you cannot bear."

If Rupert had not been first *tête montée*, and then very angry, he would not have made this remark.

"Generosity!" cried Ruth. "No. If honour and generosity are required between us, I'll make no claim on them. Let it all be over—we'll part. Yes, we'll part, and then you need deny yourself nothing—nothing for my sake."

"It might be best—if you look on it in this way."

There was a silence. Rupert pulled his moustaches sharply; his face was pale; in that hot moment he felt he might be well quit of Ruth's unreasonable jealousy and suspicion. Ruth sat quite still; she would have yielded at a word, perhaps—in a minute more she might even have made the first advance to a reconciliation. But as the dance ended the con-

servatory filled with people. They were joined by two or three couples, and a young lady, an old acquaintance of Rupert's, exclaimed, with sufficient forwardness,—

"Oh, Captain Lester, what do you think we were discussing? People say that you are engaged to be married. Is it true—do tell me?"

"No," said Rupert shortly. "I am not engaged to be married, nor likely to be."

He laughed bitterly as he spoke, and perhaps under the circumstances could hardly have avoided some sort of denial; but the directness of this one, and the tone in which it was spoken, seemed to seal Ruth's fate. She said afterwards that she went mad at that moment, and certainly she lost the soft self-possession that was one of her chief charms, grew daring and defiant, and said and did things that others remembered long after she had recovered from the wild excitement that prompted them. The sacredness of ungovernable feeling was an article of her faith, and she was quite as miserable as

she ever thought true love would demand of any one. But the poor child, as she sat on the floor in her own room that night, with her face hidden on a chair, did not think at all that she was "having an experience," nor going through the second volume of the story, in the beginning of which she had so gloried; she only felt that she was utterly and inconceivably wretched, and angry beyond expression. Rupert did not care for her, or only cared in a commonplace fashion. There was nothing left in life for her. Evidently he had been glad to find in the quarrel an excuse for an escape.

Ruth's hot displeasure culminated when she came down to breakfast the next morning, and found that every one was regretting the departure of the officers from York, who had been obliged to take leave early that morning. They would be a great loss at the tenants' ball that night.

"Father, my father," suddenly exclaimed Alvar Lester, coming into the room with a newspaper in his hand. "See, it is here,

'Gerald Cheriton Lester.' And he is first. I said so. Ah! I rejoice!"

Alvar's eager voice and excited face attracted general attention, as he put the paper into his father's hand, and pointed over his shoulder. There was a chorus of congratulation, while Mr. Lester's blue eyes looked as bright as his son's black ones, as he hummed and ha'd, coughed two or three times, and said, with as little exultation as he could manage to show, "That he was glad Cheriton had worked hard and done his best. He was a good lad, and had never given any trouble. Now, they could have him at home for a bit."

"Ah! that will be *jolly*," said Alvar. "But he will have come home, through last night, and we shall not be there."

"Send a telegram to meet him, and ask him to come over," said young Lord Milford. "He always was a capital fellow, and I shall be delighted to see him."

"And I hope, Milford," said the young lord's mother, "that you will take example by your friend."

"Don't you build on any such hopes, mother, but I'll go and see about getting him over here at once."

Mrs. Lester was moved to encomiums on Cherry's studies and steadiness; and more than one of those present remarked with admiration the unselfish pleasure taken by the elder brother in the success of his universally popular junior.

Virginia Seyton watched her betrothed a little wistfully. Ruth's was not the only love story that was running its course through these early summer months, and Virginia's heart was not quite at ease. If "what Rupert was like," had come upon Ruth with a sudden blow, "what Alvar was like," was still something of a problem to Virginia. He was attractive to her beyond measure, he occupied every corner of her heart; it was joy to her to be near him; his gentle, chivalrous courtship gave her unimaginable delight. She could remember every glance of his eyes, every touch of his hand; but— But what? Alvar was at once too obtuse and too proud ever to

assume a character that did not belong to him. He did not think it worth while to acquire or profess new sentiments; perhaps he never even perceived that they were desired. He was, spite of his courteous tongue, as absolutely candid a person as his brother Jack. He was not a bit worse than he seemed, neither was he much better. He behaved very well in his difficult life, and regulated his conduct by certain maxims of honour and courtesy; but, in the sense in which Virginia understood the word, he had no principles at all. It was with a curious mixture of sensations that, when, *à propos* of some scrape of Dick's, she had timidly alluded to the gambling that had brought such distress on her family, Virginia heard him answer,—

"Ah, they have had much ill-fortune," without a spark apparently of righteous indignation.

Nor could she help perceiving that he scarcely ever occupied himself with anything more useful than a cigar. "My father is always busy," he would say complacently,

as he sat idle; but he did not point any popular moral; for idleness made him neither ill-humoured nor mischievous.

Virginia loved him well enough to set all her will on the side of making allowances. When he saw her scrupulous and earnest in fulfilling her religious duties, he would kiss her hand and say, "My queen is as holy as a saint," and he conformed sufficiently to the Oakby standard to satisfy her conscience, if not his own, never uttering a word that could offend her. But, as he had told Cheriton, "he did not interest himself in these matters," and she knew it.

Perhaps Virginia, diffident as to her knowledge of masculine standards and modes of expression, might never have realized even thus much to herself, but for the instinctive sense of another shortcoming in her lover, which she would not admit, and which she hated herself for even imagining. It came, by a strange turn of fate, both to her and to Ruth, to feel that the love they gave was not returned in its fulness. With what a passion of despair

and jealousy Ruth had resented the discovery has been seen.

To Virginia it brought a disheartening sense of her own demerit, a doubt of the truth of her own impressions, vexation at her own want of trustfulness, shame and self-blame, because she could not help knowing that Alvar missed sometimes the chance of a word or an interview when *she* would have secured it, because she felt that he did not care as she cared. But then, temperaments differ; some people were reserved; perhaps she was exacting, and her cheek had flushed and her eyes sparkled with joy when Alvar praised the dresses she had taken such pains to choose for the Milford *fêtes*, and when he paid her all the *attention* due from an affianced lover.

She had no cause to feel neglected, while Ruth was chafing at the sight of Rupert's flirtations. And when the news came of Cheriton's success, was she not proud of Alvar's generous delight? Yes, but *she* had never stirred his passive content to

such pleasure; he had never been in such high spirits for her! Ah! how hatefully selfish she was to think of it!

The two girls exchanged no confidences. Ruth's heart was too sore, and Virginia's too loyal for a word; but as they consulted over their dresses, and speculated whether Cheriton would arrive in time for the tenants' dance that night, each wondered what the other would say to the secret thoughts of her heart.

CHAPTER XVIII

RED SUNRISE.

"O happy world!" thought Pelleas, "all me seems
Are happy—I the happiest of them all."

On that same hot summer night, when Ruth and Rupert were first making each other miserable, and then finding out separately that they were very miserable themselves, Cheriton, with hope and joy in his heart, was speeding home to Oakby. With hope and joy, for Ruth had made up for her cold farewell, by making some little excuse for writing to him, and asking him to get her a picture of the Arms of the Colleges, a commission which, it is needless to say, he found time to execute.

This pleasure had helped him through his hard work, for he was excitable enough

to have felt the last few weeks of effort and suspense a severe strain, and had not brought quite his usual health and strength to bear on them; for he had caught a bad cold with the race in the rain at Black Tarn, and had never given himself a chance of getting rid of it. However, it was all over now, he thought, his mind was relieved, and the prospect of home with its leisure and its occupations had never seemed so delightful to him. For his love for Ruth did not shut out the thought of all other affections, it rather cast a radiance over them, and made him more conscious of their sweetness.

It was a lovely summer morning, as the train came in to Ashrigg station, the wide landscape showed clear and fresh against the cloudless sky, the peculiar northern sharpness was in the air. It was sweet to Cherry's senses, and finding no conveyance so early at Ashrigg, he set off to walk home across the dewy fields, Buffer, enchanted at his release from durance vile, trotting and barking at his heels.

By various short cuts the walk was under three miles, and Cheriton soon found himself at the house, where he had time to get some breakfast, and to feel somewhat disappointed that no one was at home to hear his good news, for he felt too tired to go and seek for congratulations at the Vicarage, where Nettie was staying, or where he would have been at least equally certain of them, to the Lodge to which the old family nurse had migrated.

So he contented himself with greeting all the dogs, and with the delightful consciousness that he had no need to exert himself, till Lord Milford's telegram arrived, and the thought of so quickly greeting Ruth, and of finding her belonging as it were to his own party, and thus making a thousand opportunities for paying her attention, roused him from his fit of languor and fatigue, and he eagerly made his preparations, and started off in the middle of the bright June day, on his further travels.

The midsummer weather in that north-

ern country had still much of the freshness and the delicacy of the spring. The trees were in their first bright green, the blue-bells lingered in the woods, the birds sang songs of hopefulness to him. Milford was in a softer, more richly-wooded landscape than Oakby, and the gardens were splendid with early roses and flowering shrubs, the park still here and there white with hawthorn.

This was the children's day, a great school feast for all the parishes round, to be followed by a children's dance in the evening. Cheriton arrived in the midst of a grand tea in the park, and pausing to detect his relations, perceived Alvar looking even unusually tall, stately, and graceful, as he walked along a row of the very tiniest children, and filled their mugs with milk and water from a huge can. He looked up as he came to the end, and saw Cheriton's laughing eyes fixed full upon him.

"Ah! Cheriton!" he exclaimed, "you are here, and with all your honours! Welcome."

"Thanks; I knew you would be pleased. So you are making yourself useful. Where's my father?"

"In the tent with Lady Milford. I will show you."

Cheriton was inclined to think it a great bore to find his own people surrounded by strangers, and was ashamed of the congratulations which the circumstances of his arrival and the warm-heartedness of his hosts called forth. So he and his father hardly said a word to each other, though they experienced a great content in being together; perhaps a more uncommon ending to a university career than Cherry's honours, even had they been doubled.

"Come, Lester," said Lord Milford, "and make yourself useful. I know you are great at sack-races, and three-legged races, and such diversions."

"After being up all night? Well, as long as I am not expected to jump in a sack myself—" said Cheriton. "Come, Alvar, don't you want another can of milk and water?"

"Ah! you laugh at me," said Alvar contentedly. "I am too glad to see you to care. This *fête* is very pleasant. I am glad you came back in time for it."

"Yes; but I wish we were all at home," said Cheriton absently, and looking anxiously round him. He soon discovered Virginia, much in her element among a crowd of school-girls; and at length his eyes found the object of their search. A little apart on a bench sat Ruth in the most delicate of white muslins, gloves, fan, and ribbons, all in first-rate order, looking, with the fantastic fashion, and brilliant dashes of colour in her dress, like a figure on a fan. She gave a little start as she saw Cheriton's figure in the distance, and her flush of disappointment as he came nearer was at once noted by him, and—misinterpreted.

"So you have got your laurels?" she said softly, as she held out her hand, and looked up in his face. "I am glad."

"Then they are worth having?" said Cheriton.

It might have been a mere jesting answer, but Ruth did not so take it, nor did he intend that she should do so. He would have altered nothing in her greeting to him, it was a better meeting than he could have imagined. Afterwards, if Ruth had wished to discourage him, she would not have found it easy; he had but one purpose, and he set himself to fulfil it; hopeful through the charm of present bliss. It was not often that Cheriton's native skies were so cloudless, nor were these hot, full summer days at all typical of the home that he loved so well. But it was in such "blue unclouded weather," in such smiling midsummer beauty, that he pictured afterwards the wind-swept moors and hardy fir-woods of his north-country home. Nor did the memory of hot, glaring sunshine, of dust, and noise, and fatigue, cease to haunt Ruth for many a day to come.

She was one of those to whom excitement gives another and an intenser self. Of this she was dimly conscious, and when she had said that she could die for Rupert,

she had perhaps not been far wrong. That extreme anger would urge her to a course almost equally desperate she had never guessed, but to give Rupert pain, to cause him chagrin and remorse, in short, to make him jealous and miserable as he had made her, she would have endured tortures.

When people are thus minded, in other words, when they are in a passion, life always helps them on. Whether by accident or by malice, she had heard plenty of gossip about Rupert; he had written no word of repentance; she knew that Lady Alice would shortly meet him again. Well, if *her* conduct was discussed between them, he should hear enough, both to hurt his provoking self-love, and to show that he did not suffer. And Cheriton offered the sort of strange counter-attraction often felt on such occasions to any one else than the object of anger.

She had always liked to "talk to Cherry," his love was flattering, and she instinctively knew that it was true. He was also a singularly attractive and lovable person,

and in Ruth's sore-hearted rage she felt his charm. "It was nice to be with him—he did her good;" and if she could wound Rupert and please herself, the possible disappointment to Cheriton was not worth considering. But Ruth reckoned without her host. She neither allowed for Cheriton's ardour, nor for the effect that it would have on her; she did not know how definite her choice must be.

Cherry was not nearly so useful as his friend had expected; he was too tired to play games, and dancing, he said, gave him a pain in his side and made him cough, which was true, and would have been an equally good reason against wandering about in the shrubberies and distant paths with Ruth, where he incurred other dangers than night air and dewy grass. He was too happy to heed any of them. She listened, as Ruth knew how to listen, to his account of his Oxford life—his hopes and fears—his future prospects—and she was carried away, spite of herself, by the single-minded earnestness with which he

spoke. He interested her, and she forgot herself for the moment as they strolled along; the yellow sunset dying in the distance, the first star shining over the great house behind them. Suddenly Cheriton turned and took her hand.

"Ruth," he said, "I have told you all this because it is so sweet to see you listen. I have something more to tell you now. I have a great many aims and ambitions—there's one dearer than the rest. I love my own people—my home—very much. I love you best, infinitely best. I always have loved you. Can you love me?"

"Oh, Cherry!" cried Ruth, in desperate self-defence, "don't say so! That sort of love is all a mistake. Keep to the other sort—it is a great deal better for you."

"Better!" exclaimed Cheriton. "One thing is best for me—to have you for my wife. Oh, Ruth, my darling! ever since I was a boy I have loved you. Can't you care a little for me? I think you can—I hope you can. *You* have always listened

to me and understood me. I think you know me better than any one does!"

"I know—you *do* care," said Ruth, half to herself.

"It is my very life," he said, and as she, trembling, hardly able to stand, made a half movement towards—not away from him—he threw his arms round her and drew her close. "My darling!—oh, my darling! am I so happy?—ah! thank God! Thank God!"

Ruth burst into a passion of tears. Retreat was growing impossible; she hardly knew what she wished; anger, a sort of wild triumph, the difficulty of resisting this passionate pleading, the inconceivable joy of Cheriton's face and voice, added to the overstrained excitement of her previous feelings, completely overpowered her, till her sobs were uncontrollable, and with them came the strangest impulse to tell him all, the most incongruous confidence in the justice and sympathy of this passionate lover for the love and sorrows that would have

wrecked his hopes. Ah! if she had but done so!

"Oh, what a fool I have been!" cried Cheriton, exceedingly distressed. "Oh, Ruth, my darling! I have frightened you. I'll be patient; I'll not say another word. See, here's a seat—sit down. I deserve that you should never speak to me again."

Ruth let him lead her to the bench, and endeavoured to collect her senses.

"I am not half good enough for you. You don't know what you want," she faltered.

"Oh, yes, I do. I know just what I want," said Cheriton softly and gently; but venturing to sit down beside her, and trying to reassure her by a little playfulness; "but I don't know how to ask for it. Alvar might have shown me the way."

"Oh, you know well enough," said Ruth, in a more natural tone, and in the few moments, while he sat watching her, her excitement cooled down, or rather hardened

itself into shape. Her tears dried up, and she said,—

"What would your father say?"

"He will think me too happy! Will you forgive me for startling you, and give me my answer now?"

He was half smiling, as he timidly put out his hand again. She had given reason enough to hope for the answer he wanted, and suddenly there darted into her mind as an excuse, a reason, an explanation of all this conflict of impulses, of the wish to pique Rupert to avenge herself on the one side—to snatch something from life if she could not have all on the other—a thought—"When Rupert knows he has such a rival, if he loves me, he will not give me up." She yielded her hand to Cheriton's, and said quickly,—

"Only promise me one thing. I did not think of this—it is so sudden. I am going away to-morrow, to Mrs. Grey's, for a fortnight. Promise not to tell any one—your father, your brothers, till I come back. Give me time to—to get used to it first."

"Of course," said Cheriton reluctantly, "that must be as you please. But I long to tell them of my great happiness. And my father will care so much about it. But of course I promise. But I may write to you?"

"No—no—then every one will find it out!" said Ruth, with recurring agitation. "You—you don't know how I feel about it."

"Well, I have gained too much to complain," said Cheriton, too loyal-hearted, and too inexperienced, for a single doubt. "But Ruth, *my* Ruth, one thing—give me one kiss to remember!"

"Go then—go! some one will find us!" cried Ruth, and startled by approaching footsteps, she rushed away from him; but the treacherous kiss was given, though she felt in a moment that she would almost have died to recall it. She had revenged herself; she hated herself; she already began to try to excuse herself.

A little later, while troops of gaily-dressed children were dancing in the

lighted hall, and the out-door guests were rapidly departing, Alvar was standing on the terrace, wondering what could have become of his brother. More than one person had remarked that he looked delicate and overworked; and Alvar felt anxious as he saw him come slowly up from the grounds towards him.

"Where have you been, Cherry?" he said. "Are you not well?"

Cheriton smiled rather dreamily.

"Oh, yes, quite well," he said. There was a far-away look of blissful, peaceful content in his eyes, as if it were indeed well with him; an expression of perfect, thankful happiness, as far removed from the ordinary state of this tolerably comfortable work-a-day world as one of great wretchedness and misery; and as remarkable. As Alvar looked at him, they heard the cry of a little child. Cheriton turned and saw trotting along the terrace in the dusk a very little boy, left behind by some of the schools now trooping out of the park. Cherry lifted him up in his arms

and smiled kindly at him, trying to make out whom he belonged to, and the child clung to him, quite at ease with him. "Milford School; ah! I see their flag. Come, my lad, we'll go and find them. There, don't cry, nobody must cry to-night, of all nights in the year."

"When Lady Milford has been so kind," said Alvar, for the child's benefit.

"Ah! every one is kind!" said Cherry, with a little laugh, as he carried away the child, "and we must—say thank you."

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